

**Constructions and Perceptions of  
Competition in a UK Higher Music Education  
Institution**

---

**MARIANNA CORTESI**

**PhD**

**University of York**

**ARTS AND CREATIVE TECHNOLOGIES**

**January 2023**

# Abstract

---

This thesis investigates perceptions of competition involving university music students through the viewpoints of stakeholders within an individual UK department. In the western world, the association between music and competition is deeply rooted within higher education: explicitly competitive practices such as auditions and musical contests are often part of music students' trajectories in music colleges and conservatoires. Furthermore, competitive behaviours among students may be generated by a set of other less explicit circumstances that include social interaction with peers, extra-curricular musical activities, and the relationship with instrumental/vocal teachers. While existing studies have consistently indicated competition as an aspect connected to the culture of music learning environments (e.g. by addressing the culture of a given musical institution as 'competitive'), very little research has been devoted to exploring primarily how competitive feelings are experienced by music students in higher education. Furthermore, most research exploring the relationship between music education and competition has taken place in performance-oriented institutions where competitive feelings are likely to be predominantly connected to performance-related aspects; little attention has been devoted to investigating competition as related to other music education domains. This research, therefore, aims to bridge this gap by utilising a case study, exploring through a questionnaire the perceptions of competition of a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate music students enrolled in one UK music department. Interviews with staff members and instrumental/vocal teachers regarding students' experiences of competition within the same department ensured richness of data and supported the provision of an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions of competition. The implications of the findings for music education are discussed with regard to institutional culture, music students' expectations towards their future career, the implementation of diversity in music education and international students' adaptational challenges as connected with competition.

# Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>DECLARATION .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>16</b>
1.1 SITUATING THE RESEARCH: COMPETITION AND MUSIC EDUCATION .....	16
1.1.1 <i>Competition and the context: Musical institutions</i> .....	17
1.1.2 <i>From experiences to perceptions: Influence of competition on music students</i> .....	18
1.2 THE THESIS AND ME.....	19
1.3 RELEVANCE OF THE THESIS.....	22
1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.....	23
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	25
2.2 THE CONTEXT: HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION .....	26
2.2.1 <i>Higher education: A challenging culture</i> .....	26
2.2.2 <i>The competitive setting of higher music education</i> .....	27
2.3 COMPETITION IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION .....	29
2.3.1 <i>A comparison with sport literature</i> .....	29
2.3.2 <i>The role of assessments and feedback in higher education</i> .....	30
2.3.2.1 Assessments and feedback in higher music education: Gap in the literature .....	31
2.3.2.2 Assessments and feedback: Relationship with perceptions of competition.....	33
2.3.3 <i>The role of social relationships</i> .....	34
2.4 INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES.....	35
2.4.1 <i>Relationship between institutional cultures and competition</i> .....	35
2.4.2 <i>Cultural changes in relation to mental health in higher music education</i> .....	36
2.4.3 <i>Support within higher music education institutions</i> .....	38
2.4.3.1 Barriers to further institutional support .....	39
2.4.4 <i>Diversity of musical practices</i> .....	40
2.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPETITION AND MENTAL HEALTH .....	42
2.5.1 <i>Mental health and mental wellbeing: A preliminary distinction</i> .....	42

2.5.2 <i>Life in higher education: A challenging culture</i> .....	43
2.5.3 <i>Music students and mental health: The role of competition</i> .....	44
2.6 COMPETITION IN RELATION TO THE MUSIC INDUSTRY .....	46
2.6.1 <i>Students' perceptions of developing employability</i> .....	46
2.6.2 <i>Relationship between attitudes to competition and occupational choices</i> .....	46
2.7 CONCLUSION.....	48
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE RESEARCH DESIGN .....</b>	<b>50</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	50
3.2 THE PHILOSOPHY OF THIS RESEARCH .....	50
3.2.1 <i>Real world research</i> .....	52
3.2.2 <i>The interpretive paradigm and the researcher's positionality</i> .....	53
3.2.3 <i>The qualitative paradigm</i> .....	54
3.3 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY .....	55
3.3.1 <i>Validity</i> .....	55
3.3.2 <i>Reliability</i> .....	56
3.3.3 <i>Triangulation</i> .....	57
3.4 CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....	57
3.5 THE CASE STUDY APPLICATION WITHIN THIS RESEARCH .....	59
3.6 THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK (UOY) MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....	60
3.6.1 <i>Undergraduate courses</i> .....	61
3.6.2 <i>Postgraduate courses: taught and research</i> .....	62
3.6.3 <i>Departmental spaces and facilities</i> .....	64
3.6.4 <i>Performance opportunities and other opportunities</i> .....	65
3.6.5 <i>The academic staff</i> .....	66
3.6.6 <i>The administrative staff</i> .....	66
3.6.7 <i>Instrumental and vocal teachers</i> .....	67
3.7 OTHER RELEVANT CONTEXTS: THE UNIVERSITY SUPPORT SERVICES .....	67
3.8 THE RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY.....	68
3.8.1 <i>The research position: The research context</i> .....	69
3.8.2 <i>Advantages and disadvantages of being an insider-researcher</i> .....	69
3.8.3 <i>My position as an insider researcher</i> .....	71
3.8.4 <i>Steps taken to deal with insider researcher-related challenges</i> .....	72
3.9 CONCLUSION.....	74
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS, DATA ANALYSIS, ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....</b>	<b>75</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	75
4.2 QUESTIONNAIRES .....	75
4.2.1 <i>Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires</i> .....	75
4.2.2 <i>Questionnaire design</i> .....	76

4.2.2.1 The pilot phase .....	78
4.2.3 Questionnaire distribution .....	79
4.3 INTERVIEWS .....	80
4.3.1 Advantages and disadvantages of interviews.....	80
4.3.2 Interview design and preparation .....	81
4.3.2.1 Sequential data collection .....	81
4.3.2.2 The pilot interviews .....	82
4.3.3 The interview process.....	83
4.3.3.1 The interview transcripts .....	84
4.3.4 The telephone interview and the email interview .....	85
4.4 DATA ANALYSIS .....	85
4.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	88
4.5.1 Respect .....	88
4.5.2 Competence .....	89
4.5.3 Responsibility .....	90
4.5.4 Integrity.....	90
4.6 CONCLUSION.....	91

## **CHAPTER 5: BA MUSIC STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC**

<b>DEPARTMENT .....</b>	<b>92</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	92
5.2 PROCEDURE .....	93
5.3 RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS.....	93
5.4 BA STUDENTS' GENERAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDE TO COMPETITION ..	94
5.4.1 Discussion: BA students' conceptualisation of competition .....	97
5.4.2 Discussion: BA students' attitudes towards competition .....	98
5.5 BA STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....	100
5.5.1 Discussion: General perception of competition within the UoY Music Department .....	104
5.5.2 Discussion: Perception of opportunities within the UoY Music Department.....	105
5.5.3 Discussion: Perceptions of competition in relation to assessments .....	107
5.6 FEELINGS OF COMPETITION AND RELATIONSHIP WITH PEERS .....	108
5.6.1 Discussion: BA students' feelings of competition and relationship with peers .....	109
5.7 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEELINGS OF COMPETITION AND MENTAL WELLBEING .....	111
5.7.1 Discussion: Relationship between feelings of competition and mental health .....	113
5.8 COPING STRATEGIES AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT .....	114
5.8.1 Discussion: Use of coping strategies .....	116
5.8.2 Discussion: Support within the institution.....	117
5.9 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION IN RELATION TO FUTURE CAREER AIMS .....	119
5.9.1 Discussion: Competition and career expectations.....	120
5.10 CONCLUSION.....	120

## CHAPTER 6: PHD MUSIC STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC

<b>DEPARTMENT .....</b>	<b>123</b>
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	123
6.2 PROCEDURE .....	123
6.3 RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS.....	124
6.4 FACTORS INFLUENCING PHD STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION .....	125
6.4.1 Discussion: The impact of individual attitude on perceptions of competition .....	129
6.4.2 Discussion: The impact of performance-oriented contexts .....	129
6.5 ASPECTS PROMPTING COMPETITION IN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....	130
6.5.1 Discussion: Students' perceptions of competition within their PhD.....	132
6.5.2 Discussion: The role of visibility.....	133
6.6 ASPECTS SOFTENING PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION .....	135
6.6.1 Discussion: The role of the supervisor in softening perceptions of competition .....	137
6.6.2 Discussion: Departmental opportunities, equality and working environment .....	137
6.6.3 Discussion: The use of coping strategies .....	139
6.7 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHD STUDENTS' MENTAL WELLBEING AND PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION.....	140
6.7.1 Discussion: Responses to mental wellbeing issues arising from competition .....	142
6.8 THE IMPACT OF PHD STUDY ON PREPARATION FOR COMPETITION IN A FUTURE PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY.....	144
6.8.1 Discussion: Dealing with competition in a professional capacity.....	145
6.8.2 Discussion: Perceptions of competitiveness in academia.....	146
6.9 CONCLUSION.....	147
<b>CHAPTER 7: TAUGHT MA MUSIC STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC</b>	
<b>DEPARTMENT .....</b>	<b>150</b>
7.1 INTRODUCTION.....	150
7.2 PROCEDURE .....	151
7.3 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA .....	152
7.4 MA STUDENTS' CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF COMPETITION .....	153
7.4.1 Discussion: MA students' conceptualisations of competition .....	155
7.4.2 Discussion: MA students' attitudes towards competition.....	156
7.5 ASPECTS PROMPTING COMPETITION AMONG MA STUDENTS IN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....	157
7.5.1 Discussion: Peer competition in relation to departmental opportunities .....	160
7.5.2 Discussion: Perception of performance opportunities .....	160
7.5.3 Discussion: Competition related to assessments, marks and feedback .....	161
7.6 ASPECTS SOFTENING COMPETITION IN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....	162
7.6.1 Discussion: The role of peers in reducing perceptions of competition .....	164

7.6.2 Discussion: Departmental policies and opportunities .....	165
7.6.3 Discussion: Coping strategies .....	166
7.7 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION IN RELATION TO PREVIOUS UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES AND STUDYING ABROAD .....	167
7.7.1 Discussion: Competition in previous undergraduate studies .....	168
7.7.2 Discussion: Competition in foreign higher education systems .....	169
7.8 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION AND WELLBEING .....	170
7.8.1 Discussion: Responses to mental wellbeing issues arising from competition .....	173
7.9 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION WITHIN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY .....	174
7.9.1 Discussion: Competition in the music industry and employability skills .....	176
7.10 CONCLUSION .....	177

**CHAPTER 8: INSTRUMENTAL AND VOCAL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT.....180**

8.1 INTRODUCTION .....	180
8.2 PROCEDURE .....	180
8.3 PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHICS .....	181
8.4 IVTS' CONCEPTUALISATIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS COMPETITION .....	183
8.4.1 Teachers' twofold view of competition .....	183
8.4.2 Teachers' views on the genesis of competitive attitudes .....	184
8.4.2.1 Past experiences and cultural backgrounds.....	185
8.4.3 Teachers' attitudes to competition within their teaching .....	186
8.4.4 Discussion: IVTs' conceptualisations and attitudes towards competition.....	188
8.5 TEACHERS' VIEWS OF COMPETITION IN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT.....	191
8.5.1 Aspects fostering competition in the UoY Music Department .....	191
8.5.1.1 Recitals, auditions and repertoire.....	192
8.5.1.2 Social media, recording and assessments.....	194
8.5.2 Aspects softening competition in the department .....	195
8.5.3 Discussion: Teachers' views of competition in the department .....	196
8.6 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT'S CULTURE .....	199
8.6.1 Competition in relation to other institutions.....	199
8.6.2 Suggestions for further actions and challenges .....	200
8.6.3 Discussion: Teachers' perceptions of the department's institutional culture.....	201
8.7 TEACHERS' PROVISION OF SUPPORT TO STUDENTS.....	203
8.7.1 Impact of competition on students' wellbeing; support provision .....	203
8.7.2 Limitations to teachers' support .....	204
8.7.3 Discussion: Teachers' provision of support to students.....	204
8.8 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE COMPETITIVENESS WITHIN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY .....	206
8.8.1 Competition within musical performance careers .....	206
8.8.2 Discussion: The competitiveness of the music industry.....	207

8.9 CONCLUSION.....	208
<b>CHAPTER 9: ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....</b>	<b>212</b>
9.1 INTRODUCTION.....	212
9.2 PROCEDURE .....	213
9.3 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA .....	214
9.4 STAFF CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT ....	215
9.4.1 Views on competition.....	215
9.4.2 Staff views on the effects of competition.....	216
9.4.2.1 Staff perspectives on students' attitudes towards competition.....	218
9.4.3 Staff awareness of competition in relation to their roles.....	220
9.4.4 Discussion: Staff conceptualisation of competition within the UoY Music Department ..	221
9.5 ASPECTS INFLUENCING COMPETITION IN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT .....	224
9.5.1 Aspects creating competition.....	224
9.5.1.1 Postgraduate and undergraduate students; international students and home students .....	225
9.5.2 Performance activities.....	227
9.5.3 Marks and assessments .....	228
9.5.4 Departmental opportunities that soften competition.....	230
9.5.5 Discussion: Aspects influencing competition in the UoY Music Department .....	232
9.6 PERCEPTION OF THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE .....	236
9.6.1 Considerations of institutional culture related to competition in the UoY Music Department .....	236
9.6.2 Discussion: Perception of the UoY Music Department institutional culture.....	237
9.7 MENTAL WELLBEING AND SUPPORT PROVISION .....	238
9.7.1 Impact of competition on mental wellbeing .....	238
9.7.2 Support systems .....	240
9.7.3 Suggestions for further actions .....	241
9.7.3.1 Diversity .....	242
9.7.4 Limitations to support provision .....	243
9.7.5 Discussion: Mental wellbeing and support provision .....	245
9.8 PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION WITHIN THE UOY MUSIC DEPARTMENT IN RELATION TO PROFESSIONAL MUSICAL CAREERS .....	247
9.8.1 Competition within the music industry .....	247
9.8.2 Discussion: Perceptions of competitiveness in relation to professional musical careers ..	248
9.9 CONCLUSION.....	250
<b>CHAPTER 10: GENERAL DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>253</b>
10.1 INTRODUCTION.....	253
10.2 RESEARCH QUESTION 1 .....	254



10.2.1	<i>Understanding of competition</i>	254
10.2.1.1	<i>Inevitability of competition</i>	255
10.2.1.2	<i>Competition in opposition to music making</i>	256
10.2.2	<i>Students' attitudes towards competition</i>	257
10.2.2.1	<i>Factors influencing students' attitudes towards competition</i>	258
10.3	RESEARCH QUESTION 2	259
10.3.1	<i>Competition connected to musical performance</i>	260
10.3.1.1	<i>Auditions</i>	261
10.3.1.2	<i>Competition for resources in the department</i>	261
10.3.2	<i>Competition connected to marks and assessments</i>	262
10.3.2.1	<i>Visibility in assessments</i>	263
10.3.3	<i>Aspects softening competition</i>	264
10.3.4	<i>Peer relationships</i>	266
10.4	RESEARCH QUESTION 3	267
10.4.1	<i>The institutional ethos</i>	267
10.4.2	<i>Curricular aspects</i>	268
10.4.3	<i>The attitudes of staff, teachers and students</i>	269
10.4.3.1	<i>The hidden curriculum</i>	270
10.4.4	<i>Challenges to the implementation of diversity</i>	271
10.5	RESEARCH QUESTION 4	272
10.5.1	<i>Students' wellbeing and competition in the department</i>	273
10.5.2	<i>Support within the institution and coping strategies</i>	273
10.5.2.1	<i>Barriers to further support provision</i>	275
10.6	RESEARCH QUESTION 5	276
10.6.1	<i>The influence of the UoY Music Department on students' perceptions of competition within the music industry</i>	276
10.7	PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETITION AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS	278
10.7.1	<i>Language-related perceptions of competition</i>	279
10.7.2	<i>Access and use of institutional support</i>	280
10.8	CONCLUSION	280
<b>CHAPTER 11: IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION</b>		<b>282</b>
11.1	INTRODUCTION	282
11.2	KEY FINDINGS	283
11.3	IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	286
11.3.1	<i>Context and individual experiences</i>	286
11.3.2	<i>Expectations towards the music industry</i>	287
11.3.3	<i>Prestige, visibility and diversity of musical practices</i>	288
11.3.4	<i>Hidden attitudes to competition</i>	289
11.3.5	<i>International students' adaptation</i>	290

11.4 LIMITATIONS .....	291
11.4.1 <i>Limitations related to the researcher's positionality</i> .....	291
11.4.2 <i>Methodological limitations</i> .....	291
11.5 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS .....	292
11.6 CONCLUSION.....	295
<b>REFERENCE LIST.....</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>LIST OF APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>338</b>

# List of Tables

Table 5.1: Likert Scale rating .....	96
Table 5.2: Likert scale statements investigating BA Music and MASR students' attitudes towards competition .....	96
Table 5.3: Likert scale statements investigating BA Music and MASR students' perceptions of competition towards departmental activities and assessments .....	102
Table 5.4: Likert scale statements investigating BA Music students' assessment of their own mental health .....	112
Table 6.1: Likert scale statements investigating PhD Music students' attitudes towards competition .....	127
Table 6.2: Likert scale statements investigating PhD Music students' assessment of their own mental health .....	140
Table 7.1: Likert scale statements investigating MA Music students' attitudes towards competition .....	154
Table 7.2: Likert scale statements investigating MA Music students' perceptions of competition in relation to assessments .....	158
Table 7.3: Likert scale statements investigating MA Music students' assessment of their own mental health .....	171
Table 8.1: Years spent working as instrumental or vocal teachers at the UoY Music Department .....	182
Table 8.2: Participants' instrumental specialism .....	182
Table 8.3: Participants' employment as IVTs in other institutions .....	183
Table 9.1: Years spent working as contracted members of the academic/administrative staff at the UoY Music Department .....	214
Table 9.2: Participants' employment as academic/administrative staff members in other higher education institutions .....	215

# List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Structure of the thesis .....	24
Figure 4.1: The data analysis of qualitative findings .....	87
Figure 5.1: BA respondents' demographic data .....	94
Figure 6.1: PhD respondents' demographic data .....	125
Figure 7.1: MA respondents' demographic data .....	152
Figure 7.2: Respondents' distribution across MA programmes .....	153

# Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to offer my thanks to all my participants. I am deeply grateful for the time they gave me during a very challenging time, and without whom this thesis would have never seen the light of day.

I'd like to acknowledge several people from the University of York Music Department: in particular, I am grateful to Professor Peter Seymour for his understanding attitude when I needed it most; to Gilly Howe and Catherine Duncan for their administrative support; to the whole Music Education team for their thought-provoking discussions, comments and advice. I am particularly thankful to Dr Naomi Norton for her support and advice on wellbeing related literature, Dr Mimi O'Neill for her vital help with descriptive statistics and Dr Daniel March for his valuable comments.

A special thank you goes to Kath Watson: working with her at the Reception desk of the UoY Music Department in these four years helped distract me from the PhD when I needed it and recharged my batteries. Most importantly, I thank her for her enduring efforts to secure my desk job during the Covid-19 pandemic: having that weekly commitment outside of my house kept me going and motivated in such challenging circumstances.

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr Liz Haddon, whose endless support, availability, advice and experience guided me through this thesis. Her patience in helping me revise my chapters multiple times, discussing research themes as well as her listening attitude had been vital to develop my confidence as a researcher.

Many thanks to the whole Berrick Saul Building team – Pedro, Diana, Akhbar – and particularly to Eduardo. Our friendship made this journey lighter and funnier. I'd also like to acknowledge Jin for being a dear friend during these years and my lifelong friends in Italy, particularly but not only, Giulia: I know that the kilometres between us will never be a barrier. You are my safe haven.

Special thanks to Ioanna and Wenjun. These four years would have not been the same without our special friendships: hotpot evenings, girls' nights, laughs, and day trips together are among my dearest memories, and I look forward to many more!

To my mum and dad: your invaluable love, care and support have been a vital component of this work. Research is an act of inquiry and discovery, and the fruits of your long-lasting dedication to grow me into a curious, inquiring, analytical and resilient woman are all in this four-year research. For this reason, this thesis is dedicated to you.

And last, my biggest thank you goes to my most precious gem, Federico: your love enlightened me every single day of these years. Your bright and beautiful mind makes me question my certainties and challenge my thoughts; more than anyone else, you have made me a better researcher and a better human being, and I truly look forward to entering a new, post-PhD life hand in hand with you.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References. This research received approval from the University of York Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee.

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Situating the research: Competition and music education**

The Cambridge Dictionary defines competition as ‘a situation in which someone is trying to win something or be more successful than someone else’ (Competition, 2023). This description considers competition as a social process where individuals or organisations strive to prevail or win over others as a measurement of their success; several other definitions echo this one, particularly but not only those referring to sport and management (Berta et al., 2012; Cattani et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2001). Nonetheless, other researchers (Fabian & Ross, 1984; Robson, 2004) include definitions that do not necessarily consider the presence of others as a prerequisite; in this sense, competition can be conceptualised as self-directed.

While competing to win may not be the ultimate goal of music making as it is in sport, there is nevertheless a connection between different forms of competition and music. Some examples of competition are provided by the history of music; from the rivalry between the two composers Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner to that between sopranos Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi in the twentieth century, music has a long history of competition among renowned musicians (Neher, 2011). Music education, however, is one of the fields where competition is more visible; for instance, musical contests are still perceived as a means by which musicians are measured against other aspiring musicians and can gain access to performance careers (McCormick, 2015). Other examples of explicit forms of competition in music education include auditions, juried competitions, competition for resources or competition for prizes. Nonetheless, musicians may also compete more indirectly, for example to achieve social desirability within their group of peers, to achieve a favourable position that gives them a competitive advantage in the music business or compete with themselves to improve their skills at a particular music activity and enhance their self-confidence. These examples would clearly relate to students; diverse competitive behaviours and attitudes may take place among students within music education, although not only explicitly. In light of this, one of the aims of this



research is to contribute to the understanding of the multifaceted ways in which competition is experienced by higher education music students, including those less visible aspects that may orient perceptions of competition. Competition in music education can be of course experienced by other stakeholders such as instrumental/vocal and class music teachers, staff members in tertiary-level institutions, and parents. However, to narrow down the scope of this research appropriately, the focus here will be higher education music students' experiences of competition within the particular context of one university music department within the UK; further details will now be provided.

### *1.1.1 Competition and the context: Musical institutions*

Musical institutions represent a privileged context where perceptions of competition can be observed. Firstly, they represent spaces in which music students learn in a complex interconnection of 'people, organisations, times and places' (James et al., 2007, p. 7). Secondly, the experiences of competition that students may have in music education are likely to inform their future approaches to the extremely competitive reality of music industry; this was a particularly relevant reason for orienting the decision to choose a tertiary-level institution as the context for this research. In fact, students in higher music education are more likely to consider a career within the music industry as compared to those in non-music specialised environments (e.g. students in secondary schools or in other faculties), and the preparation they receive in higher music education in relation to the high competitiveness of the music industry (Bartleet et al., 2019) may influence their decision concerning the type of career they would like to undertake. Such strong connection between competition and the music industry was substantiated by a 2017 report by Gross and Musgrave on professional musicians' mental health; when participants were asked to mention difficult job-related conditions they had experienced, only anxiety and financial insecurity were mentioned more times than competition (see p. 38). Taking that into account, it will be important to evaluate expectations of competition in relation to career choices among students who are about to take important professional decisions at the end of their higher education studies. Insight into students' awareness of the kind of professional environments they are likely to encounter in the future, indeed, might contribute to

the development of future institutional discussions that could positively impact on both students' lives and their future careers.

The decision to conduct this research within one university music department rather than other types of institutions (e.g. conservatoires) was guided by an urgency to explore how music students' perceptions of competition take place in multifaceted learning contexts; as Chapter 2 will detail, literature on the relationship between music students and competition has been primarily conducted in institutions with a performance-oriented ethos (e.g. conservatoires or music colleges), which resulted in a limited knowledge of how experiences of competition take place across the wider sector, such as in university music departments where music students undergo a more all-embracing learning and may consider a more diverse range of career options.

### *1.1.2 From experiences to perceptions: Influence of competition on music students*

In Chapter 2 existing literature on music and competition will be reviewed in detail; however, it is useful to highlight here that current research has recognised a relationship between competition and music and, even though this connection has not been the main focus of their investigation, existing studies have shown that music students undergo demanding levels of competition within higher music education (Pecen et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2017; Williamon & Thompson, 2006), which at times contributed to deteriorating levels of mental health among music students (Juuti & Littleton, 2010; Wristen, 2013). This indicates that a pure recall of competitive experiences would not be of great value; instead, it is the subjective element of how these experiences are perceived by students that is of particular interest for this research.

It could be speculated that students' responses to competition may either be adaptive or maladaptive; existing research seems partially to substantiate this view by outlining how musical contests act as a motivator for students to progress and achieve (Buyer, 2005) but can also be a cause of stress and anxiety (Austin, 1990). A closer look at literature, however, reveals that the relationship between motivation and competition is not as strong as it may seem; McPherson and Hendricks (2010), for example, viewed competition as a limited educational tool due to its focus on an

externally-driven motivation – winning the contests or obtaining a seat in coveted ensembles – while Austin (1988) believed that competition may act as a motivation only for those music students with a high level of self-confidence who believe they may be able to win. More abundant literature, instead (see Chapter 2), revealed music students' maladaptive responses to competition. Therefore, it is the impact of competition on music students that is at the heart of this thesis; beyond gathering an understanding of students' competitive behaviours, attitudes, perceptions and experiences, the recognition of how these affect music students' lives and, potentially, their mental health or wellbeing is an essential requirement for the meaningfulness of this research. In other words, the scope of this research goes beyond a mere description of music students' experiences of competition in one UK higher education music department; instead, its aim is to generate further knowledge about how perceptions of competition<sup>1</sup> influence music students' experiences in higher education, wellbeing, and career choices.

Lastly, one note must address the protagonists of this thesis, namely the participants. As explained above (1.1), the focus of this research is on higher education music students' perceptions of competition; nonetheless, other stakeholders contribute to shape the varied, dynamic and complex environment of a university music department: instrumental and vocal teachers, administrative and academic members of the staff. Acknowledging their role in influencing dynamics of competition within a higher education music institution was imperative for research that aims to explore rigorously and extensively how students' perceptions of competition are shaped within that specific institutional environment; thus, they were also involved in the research process as participants and their perspectives on students' perceptions of competition are included (for more details, see Chapters 3 and 4).

## **1.2 The thesis and me**

My individual life history as a piano student informed my decision to undertake this research. In particular, I have witnessed both first-hand and indirectly the multifaceted

---

<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, competition will be often discussed as a matter of subjective perception. To avoid confusion between subjective perceptions of competition and musical competitions, the latter will be referred to as 'musical contests' throughout.

ways in which competitive feelings take place among music students and the role that institutional cultures play in exacerbating or softening such feelings.

My individual experience with music-related feelings of competition dates back to 2007 when, at the age of 14, I failed the entrance exam to be accepted for a junior level piano performance degree in one Italian conservatoire: despite the commitment and effort, my preparation was deemed by the examination board as not sufficient to fulfil the standard requirements of that degree; in particular, I was told that my technical grounding was incorrect and, given that at that stage I had been playing piano for more than eight years, they believed there was little room to reverse it. That was the first time I perceived myself as having been a big fish in a small pond, where the skills and capabilities acquired within my pond – a music school in the countryside – were far from being enough to be competitive in much more demanding institutional environments. How far I was from the required standard was something I learned gradually: in terms of commitment and perseverance, the price I paid to achieve six years later (in 2013) the level required to pass the entrance exam and be accepted at another, more highly ranked conservatoire – this time for a tertiary-level piano performance degree – included some months to find a new piano teacher who believed there was room to reverse my technique (the majority of the piano teachers who I had a trial lesson with agreed with the opinion of the first examination board), two full years of technical retraining, and four more years to achieve an advanced level of piano playing suitable for that conservatoire. In the years after graduating from conservatoire, particularly as a student on the MA in Music Education: Instrumental and Vocal Teaching at the University of York, I started developing my research interest into the relationship between music making and competition, which supported a deeper reflexivity in relation to those six years spent re-learning my piano technique and, subsequently, building up an adequate repertoire for the conservatoire requirements. I realised that, beyond the love for my instrument, a sense of self-directed competition (and, in full honesty, an inborn stubbornness) aimed at proving myself capable to achieve the level required for a specialised music institution fuelled my perseverance; in that sense, competitive feelings had a positive effect on me.

Nonetheless, particularly during my conservatoire years I had sensed the existence of a subtle sense of competition which, in some cases, had a destructive effect on some of my fellow musicians' ability to succeed. In some cases, students and

peers with whom I had informal conversations reportedly did not undertake important musical opportunities they felt they would have benefitted from because they believed they did not have many chances to succeed, despite no evidence supporting such speculation. Furthermore, I also witnessed situations in which fellow musicians who had previously expressed, directly or more subtly, a competitive attitude towards themselves or their peers, ended up underperforming in assessments as their preparation had not been reflected in their performance. On rare occasions, some of these peers developed such a low level of self-confidence that it prevented them from pursuing further their musical studies. While these behaviours embedded typical symptoms of Music Performance Anxiety<sup>2</sup> (MPA), they seemed to me to entail some competitive undertones that were not explicitly acknowledged. These experiences, however different from my own, had in common with mine the perception that elements of externally (peer-directed) or internally (self-directed) driven competition contributed to determine students' specific behaviours and choices, either positively or negatively.

Lastly, my experiences of diverse institutional settings also contributed to my decision to conduct this research within the University of York Music Department<sup>3</sup>. As a conservatoire student I had the opportunity to observe a bi-directional influence between students and institution in determining the competitiveness of one specific institutional culture. Particularly in my conservatoire, I perceived some peers' attitudes and behaviours as outwardly competitive; these were particularly evident in relation to opportunities viewed as relevant to foster a performance career (e.g. participating in masterclasses with renowned performers, informally competing with other students to form a network of useful professional contacts within the conservatoire). Nonetheless, these attitudes were also fostered by the institution itself through conveying – not necessarily intentionally – a competitive mindset that somehow encouraged students to be competitive with each other; for example, by presenting some opportunities, repertoires, or genres as more desirable than others, which created a hierarchical

---

<sup>2</sup> For more comprehensive information on Music Performance Anxiety, see Kenny's 2011 book *The Psychology of Music Performance Anxiety*, published by Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> This Music Department is from 2022 part of the University of York School of Arts and Creative Technologies. I will continue to refer to it as the *UoY Music Department* throughout the thesis as that was its official name when I conducted this research.

structure of practices that had competitive implications on individual students on the basis of the specialisations and opportunities they decided to undertake.

Through subsequent discussions with students who attended other conservatoires both in Italy and in the UK, I developed the impression that a competitive culture may pertain to several conservatoire environments<sup>4</sup>. Instead, my personal experience of the University of York (UoY) Music Department was different; while I had a limited view on competitive feelings among students due to the limited time spent there prior to commencing my PhD, I perceived openness to consider, acknowledge and discuss uncomfortable situations which may embed students' feelings of competition. Having developed – through my MA assignments – a research interest into music students' perceptions of competition and the relationship of these with institutional cultures, I decided to further my studies with PhD research to explore this topic.

### **1.3 Relevance of the thesis**

As stated throughout this chapter, this thesis aims to contribute to expand existing knowledge on how perceptions of competition may impact on music students. In light of my individual experiences and existing research, I speculated that the impact that such perceptions may have on these students' study experiences, future choices and wellbeing are worthy of attention. I consider tertiary-level music institutions as a privileged context for research due to the specialism they entail; indeed, students who enrol in a tertiary-level music programme are likely to consider a job in the music industry as a career choice and, thus, become professional musicians.

It is my hope that this thesis will foster further research on the relationship between music and competition and that practical outcomes may emerge from it (see Chapter 11 for implications, practical recommendations and suggestions for further research). In particular, further research is needed due to competition having been mainly investigated as an aspect that influences musicians' life in conjunction with other challenges (such as financial insecurities and MPA) and is rarely singled out in itself. Furthermore, my individual experience as well as engagement with existing

---

<sup>4</sup> It is worth specifying that this was merely an impression developed through personal experience and, as such, has purely a subjective value. It is not meant to be presented as an objective and generalisable statement of the degree of competition experienced in conservatoires.

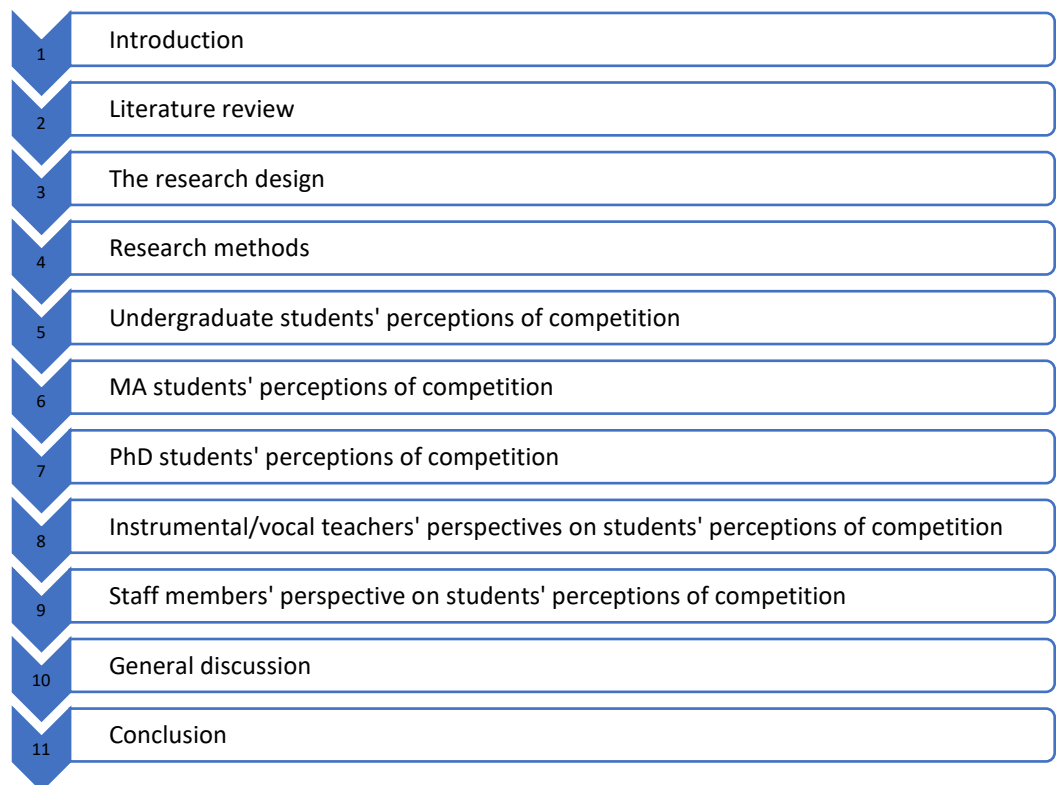
literature indicate that the connection between students' perceptions of competition and institutional cultures call for a practical application; stakeholders within institutions, policy makers, educators and students will need to cooperate and reflect on current practice to create or reinforce institutional cultures where the implications of competitive perceptions for students' experiences, wellbeing and future choices are discussed and practically addressed.

## **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into 11 chapters. This chapter has introduced the concept of competition in relation to music education and contextualised it within the research setting. In Chapter 2 relevant literature on competition is discussed and the research questions (RQs) are set out; throughout the chapter the RQs are firstly presented individually in relation to existing literature and then drawn together in the final section. Chapters 3 and 4 provide details concerning the methodological framework and research methods; in particular, Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework as well as a detailed presentation of the UoY Music Department as the research context. The chapter ends with a discussion of the researcher's positionality within the study. Chapter 4 includes the presentation of the two methods of data collection: interviews and questionnaires, details of the data analysis process and ethical considerations.

Chapters 5 to 9 present the findings and discussions. More specifically, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on data obtained from the questionnaires and explore music students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department; in these chapters, findings are divided into several themes and each theme is followed by its discussion. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on data obtained from the interviews conducted with instrumental and vocal teachers (Chapter 8) and academic and administrative staff members (Chapter 9). Again, data are presented divided into themes, each one followed by its discussion. Having used an inductive approach to data analysis (for more details, see 4.4), findings in Chapters 5-9 are not discussed in relation to each research question; indeed, due to exploratory nature of this research, doing so would have limited the possibility of being open to other themes that may be of interest for this study. Research questions, however, are addressed in Chapter 10 where a general discussion of the findings is presented in relation to each RQ. Furthermore, the specific

perceptions of competition of international students within the UoY Music Department are discussed at the end of Chapter 10; although this theme was not included in the five RQs, its relevance for the research purpose oriented the decision to include it in the general discussion of the findings. Chapter 11 consists of a summary of the key findings and their implications together with practical recommendations. Limitations of the research are addressed and future research directions are suggested. For clarity, Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of the thesis structure.



*Figure 1.1: Structure of the thesis*



# **Chapter 2: Literature review**

## **2.1 Introduction**

Students in UK higher education enter a competitive setting that is often rooted within institutional competition between secondary schools to respond to pressure arising from performance indicators (Bradley et al., 2001; Levačić, 2004). For students, performing well at school and obtaining high grades means enhancing their chances of being offered a place at university. Furthermore, evidence from literature suggests that factors such as the university rankings – often seen as marks of prestige – influence students’ university choices (Dearden et al., 2019; Sung & Yang, 2008); thus, competition among students for the top-ranking universities is particularly intense. While such competitive context is irrespective of university students’ specialisations, music students form a specific type of higher education students who experience subject-specific perception of competition. As it will be further explored, music is a competitive field and music students start experiencing competition from an early age within their musical training. Competition among music students can be displayed in many ways; while some studies have addressed feelings of competition as part of the experience of young musicians (Williamon & Thompson, 2006) and professionals (Gross & Musgrave, 2017) no research to date has been extensively conducted with the purpose of investigating higher education music students’ perceptions of competition. Moreover, most music education-based studies have focussed on performance-related competition that arises within conservatoires and in the context of instrumental/vocal studies. Less research has been conducted on, for example, types of academic competition that might arise within university music departments and which may involve other figures such as academic supervisors and other university staff members.

Consequently, the aim of this literature review is to provide a rationale for this project by delivering a comprehensive representation of what has been addressed by research on higher education music students’ experience of competition so far. The first section will contextualise higher music education as a setting where competitive feelings among students may occur. The second part will review literature that investigated factors influencing students’ perceptions of competition in tertiary-level

contexts. The third section will focus on institutional aspects and how these may influence students' competitive feelings, and the fourth part will focus on the relationship between perceptions of competition and mental health/wellbeing. The last part will review literature in relation to experiences of competition in higher music education and students' career expectations.

## **2.2 The context: Higher music education**

### *2.2.1 Higher education: A challenging culture*

Attending a university or conservatoire often means entering a competitive setting. Such pervasive competitiveness has been widely researched; a German study outlined that external competition among German universities broadly increased since the publication of university rankings which dates back to the 1990s (Horstschräer, 2012). In particular, the author claims that the greater homogeneity of German universities in terms of quality as compared to American ones was reversed by the competitiveness implied in the ranking system. Dimitrova and Dimitrova (2017) refer to competition among universities in terms of 'offering a high quality educational product that satisfies both the consumers of educational services (students) and the consumers of the product of the HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] (the labour market, where students realize themselves), to the fullest' (p. 313). The ability of successfully fulfilling these objectives provides universities with a competitive advantage over others, enhancing their ability to attract high-achieving students. The existence of strong external competition among universities has also been acknowledged in Australia and USA (Currie & Vidovich, 2000).

Besides competition among universities, it is safe to assume that competitiveness in higher education institutions takes place also as internal competition, which is currently a less researched topic. This type of competition may be explained by referring to the comparison model synthesised by Garcia et al. (2013). Based on previous literature, the authors argue that the degree of *similarity* and *closeness* to a specific target enhance competitiveness among individuals. In a university context, students are part of the same population, undergo the same learning and assessment process and share the same overarching educational path.

Consequently, these situational factors are likely to trigger some forms of competition among them.

Existing research revealed the existence of high levels of competitiveness in higher education among students of a specific discipline (Lempp & Seale, 2004; Laidlaw et al., 2016) while other authors outlined the intrinsic competitiveness of particular disciplines as sport (Feezell, 2013). However, these studies did not investigate competition as a primary area of inquiry; while Lempp and Seale (2004) investigated the hidden curriculum<sup>5</sup> within one UK medical school, Laidlaw et al. (2016) focussed on students' perceptions of mental health and institutional support. In both studies, competition was an ancillary aspect of the authors' inquiry and emerged from participants' answers in relation to the competitive atmosphere of their faculty. To my knowledge, no extensive research has yet been undertaken to explore specifically the multifaceted competitive dynamics that might shape university students' experiences within a higher education institution. Yet, findings from Lempp and Seale (2004) and Laidlaw et al. (2016) suggested that facing competitiveness within university might be challenging for students, especially for those in their first undergraduate year; therefore, further research might help students to cope with this challenge and improve their life quality during this period of crucial change.

### *2.2.2 The competitive setting of higher music education*

While a limited amount of research has specifically investigated music students' perceptions of competition, the competitiveness experienced by many workers within the music industry<sup>6</sup> is well-documented. In Gross & Musgrave's report (2017), a sample of 28 professional performers and music industry professionals spontaneously mentioned competitive situations as part of their working lives. To acknowledge the impact of competition on musicians, it is relevant to note that when these participants were asked to mention difficult conditions related to their job that they had experienced, only anxiety (18) and financial insecurity (16) were mentioned more

---

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between hidden curriculum and competition will be explored in detail in Chapter 10 (see 10.4.3.2).

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the thesis I will refer to the music industry as 'an umbrella term' to define those jobs 'involved in music creation, performance, and distribution' (Moulton & Clayton, 2021, n.d.). This term will then intentionally have a broad scope; to articulate distinct jobs within the music industry, I will use specific terminology (e.g. performer, sound recording engineer, music teacher, etc.).

times than competition (p. 38). Furthermore, evidence from literature suggests that the high competitiveness of some domains within the music industry (Cottrell, 2004; Creech et al., 2008; Klein et al., 2017) resulted in the increasing prevalence of portfolio careers (Bartleet et al., 2019; Hallam & Gaunt, 2012) as a sustainable response to such competitiveness (Bennett, 2007; Mills, 2004).

It may be speculated that the high incidence of competitiveness experienced by professional musicians is potentially mirrored in educational environments. This idea seems to be confirmed by Pecun et al. (2018) in a UK study conducted among fifteen performers of different levels at different stages of their careers. The majority of participants mentioned taking part in musical competition as detrimental for their wellbeing during their training years. Furthermore, social comparison with peers, and working with instrumental and vocal teachers who wanted to restrict their students' contact with other teachers, potentially creating perceptions of hierarchy, were also regarded as challenges that the majority of participants had to face. Such an atmosphere of competitiveness experienced by higher education music students in conservatoire settings is echoed by other relevant literature (Araujo et al., 2017; MacNamara et al., 2006; Perkins et al., 2017; Stoeber & Eismann, 2007; Williamon & Thompson, 2016).

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it is worth noting that the above-mentioned studies have been conducted with samples of current or former conservatoire students. Less research has been undertaken within university higher music education; a recent comparative study investigated university music students' experiences of stress, workload and coping strategies across several institutions in Finland and UK (Jääskeläinen et al., 2020). Furthermore, a UK study (Papageorgi et al., 2010) investigated the levels of anxiety experienced by undergraduate music students in three institutions in relation to different learning environments, namely conservatoires and university music departments. The results of this study highlighted different perceptions of competition among students depending on the learning environment; further research could be devoted to solely investigate the specificity of competitive feelings in university music education: in particular, it is speculated that gathering an understanding of how these feelings may arise among university music students could provide a different perspective on the experiences of competition of these students who operate and study in a different and less researched music

learning environment. In order to gather more comprehensive and reliable data, the perspective of other stakeholders within the context of a university music department<sup>7</sup> (e.g. staff members, instrumental and vocal teachers) would also prove useful. Thus, the first research question emerges from these considerations:

- 1) How do stakeholders in one UK university music department conceptualise competition in relation to students within this context?**

## **2.3 Competition in higher music education**

### *2.3.1 A comparison with sport literature*

In the last twenty years, some aspects of the professional careers of performing musicians and athletes across different sports have been frequently compared. As Hays (2002) reported, the growing number of studies into the physical and mental challenges faced by athletes dealing with the stress of competitions (Keaney et al., 2018; Nixdorf et al., 2015) led to research being devoted to the prevention and establishment of psychological treatment for musicians' mental health issues (Burin & Osorio, 2017; Kenny, 2011; Riley, 2012; Yoshie et al., 2009). These studies all involve discussion of competition among professional musicians. However, as higher education music students are also likely to experience competition, findings might be relevant for this population. In fact, the relevance of this music-sport parallel for the present research resides firstly in the competitive aspect that characterises both fields. For example, music contests are explicitly competitive events where participants compete with each other to win prizes, often represented as an effective tool to begin a career in music performance (McCormick, 2015). Auditions for ensembles and orchestras also entail an overtly competitive component (Kegelaers et al., 2022) and are unsurprisingly associated by many musicians with stress (Chanwimalueang et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2014; van Kemenade et al., 1995). Therefore, in some domains, music and sport share an outwardly competitive feature that provides a rationale for this parallel.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Research design chapter (Chapter 3) provides the rationale for this study, including a detailed explanation for choosing a case-study methodology that investigates students' perceptions of competition within one single university music department.

The scope for this comparison is even clearer when the focus is shifted towards the management of competition-related stress; current research on coping strategies employed by athletes is currently more abundant compared to research in music (Hudson & Day, 2012; Nichols & Polman, 2007)<sup>8</sup>, even though the growing body of literature on musicians' mental health (see section 2.5.3) is progressively bringing more interest into stress-management strategies. While these above-mentioned similarities provide a rationale for an important parallel, particularly where research in the music field is not as abundant as in sport, some important differences must be delineated: competition is an integral aspect of sport, as the goal of an athlete is to win or to beat records (Feezell, 2013), whereas in music competition occurs in specific and potentially differentiated situations. Furthermore, beyond auditions and contests – which in terms of competitiveness are directly comparable with sport – competition within music may take place in other indirect ways which will now be examined.

### *2.3.2 The role of assessments and feedback in higher education*

Assessments of students' learning is a relevant part of the educational route offered by educational institutions in every subject. Literature on assessments in education is abundant and several definitions have been provided; Hanna and Dettmer (2004), for example, regarded assessments in education as 'all of the systematic ways teachers gather information in their classrooms' (p. 4). Other definitions echo the emphasis put by Hanna and Dettmer on the person who assesses, namely the teacher, rather than on the student being assessed (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019; Kimpton and Kimpton, 2019)<sup>9</sup>; indeed, in their arguments about the meaningfulness of assessments, Kimpton and Kimpton (2019) regard students' ability to 'construct a personal meaning from these assessments' (p. 331) as a secondary purpose compared to the degree to which assessments can instruct teachers in their job.

---

<sup>8</sup> Existing literature on stress management and developing of coping strategies among athletes is abundant; however, providing comprehensive evidence of sport-related literature is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, these two studies have been selected as a way of example in relation to their relevance within their field.

<sup>9</sup> Kimpton and Kimpton (2019), in a study about music in USA secondary schools, claim that 'assessment can be defined for classroom teachers as the act of making a judgment' (p.325), while the online Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines assessment as 'the process of testing, and making a judgement about someone's knowledge, ability, skills, etc.'.

If on the one hand, assessments undoubtedly are a powerful tool for teachers, on the other they represent a meaningful learning opportunity for students (see Suskie, 2009). The various articulations of assessments, in fact, give students the chance of monitoring their progress and getting involved in learning activities through staff feedback (Brown, 2015), peer feedback (Carless, 2009) and self-assessments (Boud, 1995). The relevance of assessment activities for students' learning in higher education is well explained by Carless (2009): 'where feasible, students should be engaged in identifying, drafting, summarising, or using assessment criteria [...]. These processes sensitise students to the required standards and provide the first steps towards students' self-monitoring of their own performance' (p. 81). As part of educational contexts, assessments are an integral aspect of students' process of learning; therefore, an active engagement with assessments is an opportunity for students to actively get ownership of their learning.

Another relevant aspect of students' learning evaluation is represented by feedback, namely teachers' written comments on the strengths and weaknesses of student work, alongside grades (Li & De Luca, 2014). Feedback is regarded as an essential part of the learning process for the opportunity of reflection and development offered (Weaver, 2006), but its effectiveness is largely dependent on students' attitudes: as Leenknecht et al. (2019) claimed, 'it is students' uptake of feedback that determines its effectiveness' (p. 1069). While some literature highlighted students' prevalent interest in grades and markings at the expense of feedback (Wojtas, 1998), a study conducted on a sample of 206 higher education students revealed that students are receptive to feedback and act on it (Doan, 2013). Reasons provided for valuing feedback concerned the positive impact this can have on students' awareness of previous achievement as well as on knowledge of what can be improved in the future.

### *2.3.2.1 Assessments and feedback in higher music education: Gap in the literature*

Despite a substantial body of research on the educational role of assessments and feedback (see section above 2.3.2), assessments and feedback in music education deserve greater attention due to the specificity associated with musical learning. As Fautley (2010) observed, traditionally performance is the predominant area of musical

learning to have been assessed in the UK; therefore, assessment of other relevant skills connected to musical learning (e.g. musical theory) has been overlooked. The reason for this gap might reside in the specificity of music as a taught subject; in her thesis on music as a viable subject in South Africa, Jacobs (2010) claimed that music in school is often treated as a *talent subject* rather than an academic one (see Jacobs, 2010, p. 14). This statement has many further implications, and the greater abundance of literature debating music assessments in primary and secondary schools (Fisher, 2008; Payne et al., 2019; Russell & Austin, 2010) as compared to tertiary-level music education institutions might be connected to the *talent* attribute of this subject. In fact, with the exception of peer assessments, whose benefits and related challenges in tertiary-level music education have been investigated by several researchers (Adachi et al., 2017; Brew, 1999; Carnell, 2016; Daniel, 2004; Falchikov, 1986; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Hunter & Russ, 1996; Searby & Ewers, 1997), assessment in higher music education is a less explored field compared to music assessment from childhood to secondary school.

To comply with a high level of accountability expected from policymakers and administrators, assessment criteria have to align with standards defining students' learning in relation to musical key concepts, skills and processes (Payne et al., 2019). However, the combination of practical assessments as recitals, vocal and instrumental performances and academic assessments positions music outside the 'domain of standardized testing' (Hanna, 2007, p. 7). Another potential issue impacting on measurement standardisation pertains to the use of a subjective language that involves assessing music-related outcomes (Hanna, 2007). Furthermore, Hewitt (2009) noted that devising all-encompassing assessments that closely adhere to the multiple characteristics of diverse musical practices also represents a music-related specific challenge. While these aspects could explain the fewer amount of research in this field, it may be argued that the intrinsic characteristics of higher music education create an imperative for research on related assessments: thus, assessing students' learning requires the development of assessment criteria that align with the specificities of music as a specialist subject.

Lastly, no correlation is established by existing music literature between feedback and assessments. It might be the case that students' perceptions of feedback changes in relation to the grade obtained. Moreover, due to the dual nature of practical and theoretical assessments in higher music education it is worth



investigating whether higher education music students' perceptions of assessments and feedback and its impact on learning is also dependant on the type of assessments. Potential implications for students' perceptions of competition will now be presented.

### *2.3.2.2 Assessments and feedback: Relationship with perceptions of competition*

Assessments and feedback in higher music education occur in institutions that represent specific learning contexts; as highlighted in section 2.2.1, competitiveness in higher education takes place as internal and external competition, namely within and outside the institution. In this context, assessments and feedback might play a role in the development of an internal form of competition and, potentially, have an impact on students' wellbeing<sup>10</sup>. To my knowledge, little research has investigated the relationships between feedback, assessments and competition in higher music education. However, this context has the potential to be a highly competitive one, both for practical and theoretical assessments. Hendricks et al. (2016) found that high school students who play in an orchestra that uses traditional rank-based seating are more inclined to engage in comparative behaviours; indeed, the existence of a ranking that traditionally assigns first chairs to the most accomplished musicians is likely to stimulate a sense of competition among them. Likewise, when performances are assessed following socially recognised standards of measurements (Abramo, 2017), the same competitiveness might arise to obtain the best results, promoting a competitive approach rather than a collaborative one (Hendricks, et al., 2016). Although research on assessment in music is primarily focussed on music performance (Daniel, 2004; Harrison et al., 2013), theoretical assessments in higher music education are also based on recognised standards and criteria that instructors consider when giving students marks and feedback. Therefore, the same competitive dynamics that potentially arise among students with regard to performance might also occur for theoretical assessments too, despite the likelihood of the actual work presented for assessment being less visible to peers compared to that of performance.

---

<sup>10</sup> Further details on the relationship between music students' wellbeing and perceptions of competition will be given in 2.5.3.

### *2.3.3 The role of social relationships*

Beyond assessments, some other aspects have the potential to influence music students' perceptions of competition within the context of a university music department. As mentioned in 2.3.1., literature on the competitiveness entailed in performance activities is abundant, particularly in relation to musical contests, auditions, and performance careers. Competitive feelings, however, may also manifest in less explicit ways and in other less visible domains; relationships occurring within an educational context, for example, could play a role in determining, softening or exacerbating students' perceptions of competition.

Existing studies on peer relationship in music have outlined that fear of peer judgement may increase musicians' anxiety levels (Wells et al., 2012); furthermore, in higher music education peers are students' direct competitors in contexts such as auditions or musical contests and are also the target for academic comparison related to assessments and feedback (Berthelon et al., 2019; Brouwer & Engels, 2022). In this sense, peer relationships are likely to be a determinant of competitive feelings. Nonetheless, peers may also be an important source of support which helps students cope with feelings of competition. In a report on peer support within UK universities, Gulliver and Byrom (2014) defined peer support as the 'support provided by and for people with similar conditions, problems or experiences' (p. 2). This type of support takes place among people who share a similar background and, according to the authors, the number of peer support services in USA outweighs that of professionally run services. Taking part in a peer support group could thus be beneficial for students, particularly but not only for those with mental health issues: reduction of stigma, increase of participants' networks and development of a sense of community are just a few examples of the benefits of peer support groups (Davidson et al., 1999). In a study on students' awareness of music-related health problems within one UK conservatoire, peers emerged as the most important source for psychological advice (Williamon & Thompson, 2006). In light of the increase in the prevalence of mental health issues among young people (Kessler et al., 2007) and university students (Page, 2014; Thorley, 2017), peers may be a relevant source of support which has positive effects on students' softening or managing of competition-related feelings.

Existing literature has also focussed on the important role of academic supervisors within higher education institutions, particularly for postgraduate students

(Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020; Dericks et al., 2018; Lovitts, 2001). A study conducted on a sample of university music students from one UK music department highlighted that students perceived their supervisor as one of their main points of contact (Haddon, 2019b); indeed, supervisors are required to maintain a strong relationship with students, provide support, academic and pastoral guidance and regularly meet them to review their progress within the course and their career goals (Hockey, 1995; Hughes et al., 2018). This means that supervisors are potentially perceived by students as a source of support also in relation to their feelings of competition; however, no research to date has inquired into this area. While there is space for broad research on several aspects connected to this professional role, the obligations related to students' academic progression are beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, there is scope to consider the role that the student/supervisor relationship may play with regard to music students' feelings of competition.

Current research reviewed in this section indicates that the competitive reality of music has drawn some interest from researchers, particularly in relation to performance-related aspects and musical careers. These studies, however, were not primarily aimed at unveiling participants' perceptions of competition and the focus on performance aspects makes a case for further investigation in other areas that might prompt or reduce competitive feelings among students in a university music department (e.g. social relationship, assessments). In light of this, a second research question has been formulated:

**2) Which aspects contribute to prompt or soften students' perceptions of competition in the context of one UK university music department?**

## **2.4 Institutional cultures**

### *2.4.1 Relationship between institutional cultures and competition*

The influence of institutional culture on music students' learning music has been explored by some researchers (Kingsbury, 1988; Nettl, 1995; Perkins, 2013). The institutional culture is made up of all 'the cultural practices that surround, permeate and define teaching and learning' (Perkins, 2013, p. 198) and is likely to influence several aspects of students' life. The potential relationship between the institutional

culture of university musical institutions and students' perceptions of competition in a university context is yet to be explored. One study (Demirbatir, 2015) conducted in a Turkish university music department identified competition as a challenging aspect among others encountered by students: 'high competition, isolation, failure to achieve career goals, authoritarian teaching style, and intolerance against errors caused by stress or anxiety and financial uncertainty' (p. 2198). Nonetheless, the relationship between competition and the institutional culture of that department was not explicitly discussed. A few more studies conducted in the UK also outlined the inherent competitiveness of conservatoires as a major challenge for students (Burland & Davidson, 2002; Creech et al., 2009; Juuti & Littleton, 2010; Pecen et al., 2018). The reason for the prevalence of conservatoire-based studies might reside in the relationship between musical training and the development of performance ability; indeed, the educational offering of conservatoires is historically more performance-based than that of universities (Study International Staff, 2019). Nonetheless, this differentiation is now becoming less relevant as some UK higher music institutions – the University of York Music Department, for example – offer students a mixed educational path of both performance and academic studies. This may pose questions as to how perceptions of competition potentially experienced by music students within these environments may be shaped by the institutional culture; indeed, relying on previous findings based on studies conducted in conservatoire settings might be misleading for the university context. New research needs to be conducted to explore how university music students experience competition and the extent to which these perceptions, if existent, relate to the institutional culture of the university.

#### *2.4.2 Cultural changes in relation to mental health in higher music education*

The provision of counselling services across all the UK universities (Piper & Byrom, 2017) indicates that higher education institutions appear to be attentive to their students' mental health and aim to provide them with effective support services. From a historical perspective, this educational concern reflects a fifty-year period of change in the services for the support of people with mental health issues (Turner et al., 2015); indeed, from the 1960s UK underwent a slow change in both the perception of

mental health-related issues and the provision of support services resulting in a more attentive mental health policy within educational institutions as well as in wider healthcare provision, as Turner et al. (2015) pointed out.

The positive effects of these new policies are also reflected in a greater awareness and knowledge of mental health; for example, findings from one study conducted in a Scottish university (Laidlaw, et al., 2016) among a sample of 20 undergraduate students from different departments revealed perceptions of the differentiation between mental health and mental wellbeing. On the other hand, a worrying trend also emerged from this study: most participants thought of university life as a stressful time, associating a potentially mentally disruptive situation as something that has to occur in this specific life period. Eisenberg et al. (2007) found that long-term stress at university is mostly linked with the transition into adulthood, which is seen as a stage that necessarily occurs in every person's life. Steps including leaving the parental house, achievement of independence in both studies and daily life, and starting a part-time job are all common experiences for university students that will bring them into adulthood, but these might also have an unsettling effect on them and cause a great amount of stress (Briggs et al., 2012; Demirbatir, 2012; Pownall, 2022).

In terms of mental health-related cultural changes, Eisenberg et al.'s claim (2007) that students' normalisation of distress experienced at university could represent a concrete barrier to help-seeking is also of concern. Moreover, students' tendency to keep their mental health issues private to their peers in Laidlaw et al.'s study (2016) might also reveal a persistent stigma about mental health among students that prevents them from seeking help and support within their institutions. No research to date has explored specifically the relationship between institutional support cultures and students' perceptions of competition, although Perkins et al.'s conclusions (2017) regarding students' enablers and barriers to optimal health within one UK conservatoire embedded considerations of competition as part of the culture of that environment. However, more studies could be devoted to investigating support provision within institutions, which may have direct implications for students' experiences of competition and support seeking behaviours.

### *2.4.3 Support within higher music education institutions*

Findings from the above-mentioned conservatoire-based studies suggest that the negotiation of those challenges related to competition may be a demanding task for higher education music students; in this regard, the presence of a strong musical community within institutions could be particularly beneficial. The community of stakeholders in higher music education is diversified; students in the academic environment connect on a regular basis with peers but also with much of the staff, including academic supervisors, instrumental and vocal teachers, administrative staff and other educational services. As members of a musical community, these categories share a responsibility to support students' mental health in different capacities, and for the academic staff members, this is also formal part of their professional duty (Houghton et al., 2019). Furthermore, administrative staff members are part of each university department and students are highly likely to get in touch with these staff. Even if the administrative staff-student relationship is not regulated by the university and meetings do not happen on a regular, formal basis, these employees are a point of contact for students and, in some circumstances – for instance, a difficult relationship between the student and the supervisor – their supporting role may be of vital importance. Therefore, further research could investigate the nature and role of this relationship within student support.

Wristen (2013) stressed the need for music educators to 'make students aware of available support and counseling services and might also directly assist school counselors in endeavors such as administering screening inventories and offering programs to learn to cope with stressors' (p. 26). As teachers and educators are an important first point contact for students (Williamon & Thompson, 2006), their response and availability to support provision might influence students' support seeking behaviours; Wristen (2013) believed that the promotion of 'depression and anxiety as treatable conditions [...] might encourage students to seek treatment when needed' (p. 26). This suggests that the musical community may be particularly valuable for music students as a relevant support source. Such speculation was supported by Williamon and Thompson (2006): findings from their study revealed that principal-study instrumental/vocal teachers, friends and fellow musicians, previous educational institutions as well as the NHS were all considered sources of knowledge about health as well as advice providers in terms of psychological and physical

wellbeing. Depending on whether students would like to receive information or advice, the relevance of these sources changed, with principal study teachers considered as the most effective for both informing and advising.

#### *2.4.3.1 Barriers to further institutional support*

Providing students with adequate support within higher education institutions may be challenging (Barrable et al., 2018); indeed, the creation of an institutional culture aimed at providing efficient support requires a holistic involvement of the universities with several figures and different competencies (Barden & Caleb, 2019). The importance of peers, instrumental teachers, and staff members resides in the direct relationships they have with students; however, other professional figures within the university staff could also act as support providers for students, in particular student support services and mental health teams (Streatfield, 2019); a team of specialists is usually employed in these services, and the type of support they can provide is a professional one involving trained experts. Despite the obvious benefits of having professional support readily available within institutions, difficulties might arise due to a lack of previous relationship between the students and professionals of these services (Hughes, et al., 2018). Haddon (2019b) suggested that the limited visibility of the Mental Health First Aid Training (MHFAT) received by supervisors in one UK university could enhance a perception of supervisors' inability to support among music students. Therefore, it may be questioned whether enhanced communication regarding these professionals' training could reduce potential barriers arising from lack of pre-existing relationships between students and support specialist services.

Other barriers to support provision were identified by academic supervisors in a UK study involving five institutions and 52 academic supervisors from different departments (Hughes et al., 2018). Interestingly, the interviewees identified some relevant limitations to the fulfilment of this duty. Frequently addressed problems were the blurriness of boundaries and responsibility for students' wellbeing, finding the right balance between academic and pastoral role, ability to identify when to signpost students to other relevant support services, and managing their own mental health while dealing with emotional issues. Practical barriers included inadequacy of physical resources such as shared offices, accessibility of student services as well as lack of coordination between these services and supervisors, which further complicates

supervisors' work. Lack of training to respond to students' mental health issues and preparation for this role and need for support services for the staff were also mentioned.

Lastly, despite an increased general acknowledgement of the necessity of a holistic approach to support provision in higher education, a report commissioned by *Universities UK* in 2016 evidenced a problematic coordination between university support and health care services such as the NHS. Several students interviewed for this report reported a lack of coordination between university support services, GPs and specialists. These difficulties were also recognised by academics; Dr Michael Doherty, the vice-chairman of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Northern Ireland claimed 'no matter how good the local university area services are, maintaining treatment can still be a major challenge, due to student mobility and them moving from home to university and back' (Universities UK, 2018, p. 14).

#### *2.4.4 Diversity of musical practices*

Another aspect connected to the culture of musical institutions pertains to the relationship with the diversity of musical practices. In this regard, some important insights come from Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) and, particularly, from Abrahams' research (2019) on the application of critical pedagogy in music classes: the traditional guidelines that regulate musical assessments in secondary music classes are questioned by critical pedagogy; Abrahams (2019) claimed that if students operate in a context where only one specific type of music – the historically classical western music from Baroque to 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde – deserves to be mastered, they might develop an approach to musical knowledge as a series of information they are expected to assimilate. Abrahams (2019) believed that assessments are also likely to be affected by this univocal approach to musical knowledge, as they may result in a passive memorisation of information that alienates students from engagement with active learning (Suskie, 2009).

Abrahams' perspective of diverse musical learning through critical pedagogy embraces several aspects of music making and assessing, enhancing students' creativity and emancipation. Some challenges related to this approach, however, remain currently unresolved; as Henley and Barton (2022) pointed out, on an institutional level the competitive educational landscape of music education works against the



diversity of musical practices, for each educational provider is compelled to offer the most successful and widely adopted pedagogical model. However, such competition inevitably stifles differences. Secondly, real working conditions for educators are likely not to be ideal. Some students may be able to afford private instrumental/vocal lessons while others do not and this disparity might prevent students from reaching a similar standard; these differences are particularly likely to be emphasised in the context of undergraduate programmes within a university music department aimed at forming all-rounders rather than specialists. In fact, there is not a level playing field for students on entry in higher music education and it may be speculated that students who have received private instrumental/vocal lessons have a significant advantage over those who did not in the admission process of performance-oriented institutions (e.g. conservatoires). This difference may not be as relevant for students applying for non-performance specialised undergraduate programmes, but this means that students with a highly varied range of performance skills and abilities may be studying in the same educational context, which could have implications for their perceptions of competition.

The challenges to the implementation of musical diversity also pose questions regarding the creation of assessments that address disparity and inequality of previous learning conditions. While this approach could positively work in settings such as music education for children (Abrahams, 2005; Henley & Barton, 2022), further research might explore how diversity of musical practices could be deployed in tertiary-level institutions, where the disparity of students' prior experience is higher.

As highlighted in 2.4.1, evidence from literature suggests that the perception of competition within tertiary-level institutions may be dependent on the culture of different institutions. As noted above (2.4.2), studies have documented that one of the most relevant changes in the last fifty years in UK higher education relates to the provision of mental health support within institutions; in light of the potential consequences of competition on musicians and music students' wellbeing<sup>11</sup>, the implications of support provision for students' experiences of competition within

---

<sup>11</sup> The above-mentioned report from Gross and Musgrave (2017) evidenced the negative impact that perceptions of competition may have on professional musicians' wellbeing. More details in relation to students' experiences of wellbeing as related to perceptions of competition will be given in the next section.

educational institutions are worthy of attention. The relationship between music education institutions and competition is then articulated on several levels embedding cultural practices, support provision and acknowledgement of barriers to support. A third research question is thus formulated:

**3) What are stakeholders' perceptions of the institutional culture regarding competition within one UK university music department?**

## **2.5 Relationship between competition and mental health**

### *2.5.1 Mental health and mental wellbeing: A preliminary distinction*

The process of reviewing existing literature on the mental wellbeing of a specific category – higher education music students, in this case – requires a preliminary reflection on the differences between mental health and wellbeing. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as ‘a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community’ (WHO, 2014). This definition well describes the daily functioning associated with a positive mental health. However, it does not seem to acknowledge states associated with poor mental health and identifies mental health merely as a subcategory of wellbeing. Galderisi et al. (2015) argue that wellbeing and mental health are two different categories, with mental health being regarded as a ‘*dynamic state of internal equilibrium*’ (p.231). This definition echoes that of Suldo and Shaffer (2008) distinguishing between mental health and wellbeing; mental wellbeing indicates a state of mind characterised by happiness and positive feelings<sup>12</sup>, while mental health designates a condition of equilibrium that allows people to cope with everyday life demands. This distinction is key to the scope of this study; indeed, a clear understanding of the implications of these two terms may support the analysis of data from participants, specifically in relation to their responses concerning aspects connected to their mental health or wellbeing.

---

<sup>12</sup> A similar definition of wellbeing is provided by the Cambridge online Dictionary.

### *2.5.2 Life in higher education: A challenging culture*

In a report commissioned by *Student Minds*, a UK students' mental health charity association, Piper and Byrom (2017) found that 'students recognised the value of university as a place to thrive, grow and build skills' (p. 4). However, this positive attitude is challenged by data indicating a worrying prevalence of mental health conditions among students in higher education; Thorley (2017) discovered that UK higher education students were five times more likely to disclose a mental health condition to their institution than ten years ago. On the one hand, this data may reveal a more open attitude towards mental health among students; however, it might also indicate that the demands of higher education institutions are becoming increasingly challenging for students.

A consistent number of students start living away from their family for the first time in their life during their first year at university; this huge change poses problematic challenges in terms of adapting to a new lifestyle (Stallman, 2010). Moreover, transition to higher education usually implies a greater level of autonomy than previously in students' ability to self-organise their studies (Chemers, et al., 2001). In general terms, a relevant challenge that students face during university is represented by the new level of self-regulation they are expected to develop (Virtanen et al., 2013). If on the one hand transition to higher education could be perceived as an exciting moment in students' life, developing the required self-regulatory skills may turn into a challenging experience when not adequately supported.

While institutional services may be an essential source of support to tackle the above-mentioned challenges, students' coping behaviours may also embed other strategies. Again, sport literature may be helpful in this regard. Several studies reviewed by Nicholls and Polman (2007) have been devoted to investigating the types of coping strategies employed by athletes: problem-focussed coping strategies (PFCS) aimed at reducing the impact of the task itself (i.e. appropriate practice time management), emotion-focussed coping strategies (EFCS) aimed at reducing the emotional impact (i.e. breathing relaxation techniques) and avoidance coping strategies, aimed at disengaging from the stressful event (i.e. distracting activities). A more detailed account of these is outside the scope of this research, but mentioning these enables a more thorough reflection on coping strategies used by higher education music students dealing with competitive situations. Nonetheless, it is

important to avoid an automatic overlapping of sports and music literature; indeed, Hamilton et al. (1992) stated that 'each performing art has its own unique stresses' (p. 86). Consequently, music-related issues should be treated as unique, and the competition among higher education music students as a precise challenge faced by musicians.

These types of challenges and coping strategies may be defined as non-specific, for they are connected to the characteristics of most university music students irrespective of their different specialisations. However, subject-specific differentiations in terms of mental health-related concerns experienced by university music students could prove useful to identify potential relationship between perceptions of competition and mental health.

### *2.5.3 Music students and mental health: The role of competition*

Competition itself has positive traits, but it can also lead to poor mental health (Gilbert et al., 2009). One of the challenges related to the investigation of mental health among music students is the limited available research within the field, despite evidence suggesting that undergraduate music students show levels of depression and anxiety higher than students in other faculties (Demirbatir et al., 2012; Spahn et al., 2004). For example, while there is a consistent amount of literature devoted to investigating physical health prevention (Árnason et al., 2018; Cruder et al., 2020; Spahn et al., 2002; Spahn et al., 2017; Zander et al., 2010) among music students, research on mental health prevention is still at an early stage. Several prevention programmes in higher education have been previously investigated; in particular, a large review conducted by Conley et al. (2015) outlined the preventing efficacy of skill-training programmes but no specificities about the higher education contexts involved in the programmes were mentioned; therefore, there is a lack of studies that specifically investigate prevention programmes designed for higher education music students. Nonetheless, some conclusions may be drawn from literature discussing mental health concerns among musicians and the potential connection of these with competitive aspects.

As detailed in 2.3.2., existing research on assessments in music education is not scarce, despite the prevalence of school-based investigations as compared to higher education. Nevertheless, the available literature is mainly focussed on the relationship

between music assessments and students' learning; to my knowledge, no extensive research has been conducted on the impact that assessments might have on music students' mental health or wellbeing. And yet, there are reasons to believe that a connection between these two elements might exist, especially in tertiary level instruction.

Firstly, a higher level of distress among musicians is associated with evaluative or competitive situations; this was evident in relation to auditions (Kegelaers et al., 2022; Kenny et al., 2014; Vervainioti & Alexopoulos, 2015), and a Japanese study on the emotional response of musicians towards competitive versus non-competitive performance situations revealed that a sample of professional and highly skilled pianists experience higher anxiety in the competitive one (Yoshie et al., 2009). Secondly, a relationship between evaluative situations and a high level of performance anxiety was reported by a sample of undergraduate music majors enrolled in a UK university (Papageorgi et al., 2010). Thirdly, research on peer assessments in higher education indicated that assessments could involve a certain degree of competition among students, especially in small-size groups (Carnell, 2016), even though the potential connection with mental health or wellbeing has not been investigated.

Despite evidence from literature regarding the impact of evaluative situations on music students' mental health, a gap remains to be bridged in relation to other potentially competitive situations. As highlighted in the first section of this chapter, other implicitly competitive contexts may take place within higher music education (e.g. with regard to social relationships), and no research to date has primarily investigated the influence these contexts may have on students' mental health or wellbeing. A fourth research question is therefore developed:

**4) What are the perceptions of stakeholders within one UK music department with regard to the relationship between students' mental health or wellbeing and competition?**

## **2.6 Competition in relation to the music industry**

### *2.6.1 Students' perceptions of developing employability*

Despite not having been the main subject of investigation, existing studies have demonstrated that perceptions of competition exist within higher music education and their effects have been outlined (Conway et al., 2010; Papageorgi et al., 2010; Haddon, 2019b; Osborne & McPherson, 2019). More evidence is needed, however, to explore whether these perceptions may influence music students' career expectations.

The transition from higher music education to professional contexts is likely to influence music students' identity and self-perception (Cage et al., 2021), and evidence from literature outlined that some specific challenges experienced by higher education music students can be associated with a misleading understanding of what is entailed within a professional musicians' life. A few studies reveal the existence of a misrepresented perception among higher education music students about the roles in which a professional musician is engaged (Bennett, 2008; Ha, 2017; López-Iñiguez & Bennett, 2021; Teague & Smith, 2015). In particular, Teague and Smith (2015) describe a 'conflation of musician with high profile, full time performer' (p. 189) as an endemic outcome of higher music education. This perception is likely to lead to overcommitment and competitive behaviours among students that could affect their mental health (Pecen, et al., 2018). Furthermore, López-Iñiguez & Bennett (2021) claimed that an over-emphasis on the building of performance skills – which often embeds competitive behaviours – could induce music students to overlook other aspects of employability development.

### *2.6.2 Relationship between attitudes to competition and occupational choices*

As explained in section 2.2.2, the competitiveness of the music industry has been acknowledged by several researchers and may embed several career specifications; performer, sound recording engineer, music teacher, ethnomusicologist, producer are just a few examples of the multifaceted spectrum of possible musical careers. A UK study investigating career preferences among higher education music students revealed a range of variety in students' choices (Comunian et al., 2014); indeed, thinking about career choices is part of music students' life, especially for those in

tertiary education (Creech et al., 2008). However, as addressed by Nagel (1988), the process of choosing a career can be tumultuous; additionally, it is often central 'in the dynamic process of personality development' (p. 75).

Competition has been addressed as a relevant influence on undergraduate music majors' occupational choice (Zdzinski & Horne, 2014) as experiences of competition during their study years prompted some of the participants to take their musical training more seriously and subsequently pursue a career as music educators; therefore, a relationship may exist between music students' feelings/experiences of competition and their prospective career choices. In this regard, Schmidt et al. (2006) focussed on the role of individual attitudes to competition by operating an important distinction between hyper-competition, described as 'winning at any cost' (p. 140) and Personal Development Competition (PDC), which 'focuses on competition as an opportunity for personal growth' (p. 141). Both these attitudes relate to competition<sup>13</sup>, but are likely to imply a different relationship with the process of occupational choice; indeed, the qualities of hyper-competitive individuals may suit career profiles (e.g. highly competitive ones) that are not as attractive for individuals displaying high levels of PDC. Furthermore, this distinction involves just two subcategories of competition, but the existence of other subgroups cannot be excluded. Consequently, further research could be devoted to exploring the existence of other forms of competition and their relationships with students' attitude towards career choice.

The above evidence suggests that negotiating the challenges associated with the transition from higher education to professional life is a demanding but vital task for music students (Creech et al., 2008) as musicians who succeed in pursuing careers in the music industry have developed successful methods for coping with the competition and pressure experienced within higher education institutional environment (Burland & Davidson, 2002). It is likely that the competitive situations experienced by music students in higher education will influence their understanding and expectations towards their future careers, and in light of the impact that competitiveness has on professional musicians' wellbeing (Gross & Musgrave, 2017), equipping young students to deal with this may positively impact on their future

---

<sup>13</sup> See Ryckman et al. (1997) for a comprehensive study on the value of individuals with different competitive attitudes and Ryckman et al. (1990; 1996) for the development of validated scales measuring PDC and hyper-competitive attitudes.

wellbeing as professionals. It could then be of interest to gather an in-depth understanding of the relationship between music students' experiences of competition in higher education and career expectations in a university context where the focus on performance skills may not be as prioritised as in other educational contexts (e.g. conservatoires); a fifth research question is thus formulated:

- 5) How do university music students' understandings of competition within their department relate to their perceptions of the music industry?**

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In light of the existing research gap related to competition as experienced by students in higher music education and the implications these may have for students' wellbeing and career prospects, this study aims to answer the following five research questions:

- 1) How do stakeholders in one UK university music department conceptualise competition in relation to students within this context?**
- 2) Which aspects contribute to prompt or soften students' perceptions of competition in the context of one UK university music department?**
- 3) What are stakeholders' perceptions of the institutional culture regarding competition within one UK university music department?**
- 4) What are the perceptions of stakeholders within one UK music department with regard to the relationship between students' mental health or wellbeing and competition?**
- 5) How do university music students' understandings of competition within their department relate to their perceptions of the music industry?**

This project has potentially relevant implications for the higher music education sector. Greater awareness of how competitive dynamics and perceptions of support are



intertwined within higher music education institutions may inform educators and other stakeholders' policies, pedagogical approaches and reflexivity. Moreover, as evidenced by literature, mental health and wellbeing concerns are becoming an increasingly urgent matter to be addressed within higher education and in light of the high competitiveness often associated with the music-related domains it may be speculated that feelings of competition have the potential to influence music students' mental health or wellbeing; social stigma, normalisation of long-term stress reveal the existence of barriers to support help-seeking behaviours. Research therefore may also support student engagement and retention. Lastly, awareness of competitive dynamics in higher music education could be relevant for future music industry workers' attitudes towards their professional choices and may impact on their ability to cope with competitive dynamics within their professional capacity.

# **Chapter 3: The research design**

## **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the rationale for the research design adopted in this study. It begins by outlining the system of beliefs that underpin the research, namely the philosophical position of real world research, interpretivism and the qualitative paradigm. Subsequently, the concepts of validity and reliability will be addressed and a discussion on the use of case study methodology within this research will follow. Lastly, relevant information regarding the research context will be given and a reflection on my position as an insider researcher will conclude the chapter.

## **3.2 The philosophy of this research**

The methodologies of any scientific and educational research are informed by the researcher's philosophical stance. Beyond responding to research practicalities, this philosophical stance is largely dependent on the researcher's core assumptions and views about the nature of the world (Holden & Lynch, 2004). Positivism is one major approach to knowledge, with a longstanding tradition that has placed it as 'the standard philosophical view of natural science' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 21) for many years. Positivist researchers believe in the objectivity of knowledge, which is constructed by facts that can be repeatedly observed, circumscribing knowledge to what can be experienced, tested and repeated (Cohen et al., 2018).

The researcher's job is to discover causal relationships between elements that construct the world, and these rules not only apply to the natural world, but also to social science. Assuming a positivist perspective, Giddens (1976) identified both the natural and the social scientist as observers of reality, where the same methodology of natural science can be equally applied to the observation of social facts. Following this, 'universal causal laws' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 21) could also be observed, experienced and generalised in social science. Nonetheless, Cohen et al. (2018) pointed out that:

Where positivism is less successful [...] is in its application to the study of human behaviour where the immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena contrast strikingly with the order and regularity of the social world (p. 10).

Those opposing positivism applied to social science reject the conceptualisation of human behaviour as a set of universal laws; instead, they believe that the social world is defined by the subjectivity of individuals and their different interpretations of the world (Cohen et al., 2018). This philosophical position is based on interpretivism, another major approach to knowledge-gathering and understanding. At the core of interpretivism lies the subjectivity of the human experience where the researcher is not a purely external observer, but an actor involved in the reality of the world. As the interpretivist paradigm is concerned with the multiple realities that emerge from individuals' interpretations of the world, Taber (2007) claimed that generalisable laws are not the intended outcome of this type of research, for interpretivist knowledge is very much related to the research context. If, on the one hand, this may induce questioning of the relevance of interpretivist research (Biddle & Anderson, 1986), on the other it must be noted that the aim of the interpretivist paradigm is not to produce generalisable laws, but to render visible the complexities of a social world that cannot be generalised, for it is made of 'as many realities as there are participants' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 24).

As the present research centres on people's understanding and interaction within a designated social environment, my philosophical position is aligned with the interpretivist paradigm. The sociologist Max Weber used the German word *verstehen* to address the researcher's concerns to understand the meanings that different people attribute to external stimuli (O'Reilly, 2009). This premise makes it clear that 'knowledge produced by the interpretive paradigm has limited transferability' (Scotland, 2012, p. 12), since there are as many realities as participants and social contexts. Accepting that one single and objective reality cannot emerge from interpretative research is a crucial acknowledgement for the researcher who places themselves within the interpretative paradigm, as knowledge is herein constructed by people's multiple interpretation of the social events (Mack, 2010). As a researcher within the social world, I believe that the meaning of my research is constructed by

people's subjective contribution, wherein their diversified experiences with competition within the institutional context are at the core of my research interest; and my role as a researcher is to discover, understand and interpret these diverse perspectives. Thus, the intended outcome of this research is not to establish social laws, but to characterise those human behaviours inextricably linked to one specific social context (Cohen et al., 2018); namely the Music Department at the University of York during the 2019-2022 timeline of the research.

### *3.2.1 Real world research*

By undertaking research focusing on individuals working in a university music department and their understanding of competition, my direct interest concerns relevant aspects of people's lives and everyday experiences within this context. Gaining a deeper understanding of competition within the institutional setting could help people involved at different levels – students, supervisors, policy makers, support services, administrative and academic staff – deal with this subject and, possibly, improve students' experience within higher education. For this and other reasons that will be now explored, this research fits with those types of investigations described as real world research.

Robson and McCartan (2016) stated that the main difference between real world research and other academic research is that while the purpose of the latter is to bring a contribution to existing knowledge, real world research 'focuses on problems and issues of direct relevance to people's lives, to help find ways of dealing with the problem or of better understanding the issue' (p. 4). This does not negate it also providing a contribution to existing knowledge, but this distinctive feature of understanding meaningful issues relating to lived experience is typical of small-scale research where specific concerns take place within a local context; therefore, understanding and knowledge as possible outcomes of real world research are inescapably linked with the intrinsic characteristics of that context.

The context of this research is well embedded within this perspective as it examines aspects concretely connected to students' lives that take place in a specific, unique environment. However, small-scale research that takes place in a delineated context must avoid any over-simplistic interpretation of the reality, as the challenges related to generalisability of the findings (Tight, 2017) require the researcher to

articulate the complexity of the realities investigated. This characteristic clearly aligns real world research with interpretivism, and the current research, centred on the multi-layered experiences of competition among music students at the University of York, embraces these philosophical stances.

### *3.2.2 The interpretive paradigm and the researcher's positionality*

The interpretive paradigm that informs my philosophical standpoint is well displayed within the object of this research; my interest in investigating music students' multiple realities aligns this project with this paradigm (see section 3.2). In other words, such paradigm is rooted in the principle that each individual has a unique and equally valid perception of reality. In line with the qualitative approaches used within the interpretivist tradition (Bhattacharjee, 2012) this research uses interviews and questionnaires to gather data (presented in Chapter 4).

The interpretive approach has also relevant implications for the positionality of the researcher; Pyett (2003) regards it crucial for the researcher using qualitative data to accept 'that the researcher's individual attributes and perspectives have an influence on the research process' (p. 1172). Awareness of this internal position is then vital for the credibility of the research; this applies particularly to my position within the UoY Music Department, which poses specific challenges that will be addressed in this chapter (section 3.8). Nevertheless, in order for findings to be valid and reliable, the research has to be conducted rigorously. Literature proposing varied perspectives on how interpretive researchers should pursue rigour is substantial (Biggs & Büchler, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hagey, 1997; Holloway, 2008; Maher et al., 2018) and expresses a multitude of viewpoints from scholars. Regardless of this diversity, the acknowledgement of the subjectivity of meanings is an underpinning principle of qualitative research (Schmid, 1981), which has a significant impact on the research itself. Consequently, the researcher needs to acknowledge that a subjective predisposition underlies both their own position and the data obtained in order to be able to reduce the possible biases that could arise by adopting an interpretive approach (Maher et al., 2018).

### *3.2.3 The qualitative paradigm*

As noted above, this research uses qualitative data and, to a lesser degree, quantitative data, and it could be ascribed to a qualitative paradigm, selected as it aligns with the interpretivist 'position on the best ways to think about and study the social world' (Thomas, 2013, p. 110). The implementation of closed questions (see Chapter 4, section 4.4.2) did not alter the fundamentally qualitative design of this research; as noted by Silverman (2010), it is the 'model of reality' used to define the research questions that determines the design of a research project rather than 'the presence or absence of numbers and rigid structures' (p. 190). In addition, Robson and McCartan (2016) claim that a research design that could be defined as mixed method should consist of substantial elements of both qualitative and quantitative data collection. In this research, the closed questions have been used with the aim of illuminating the qualitative findings rather than for statistical purposes and the imbalance between qualitative and quantitative elements in favour of the former endorses a qualitative research design.

Qualitative research has been widely debated, discussed and deployed within educational research (Cohen, et al., 2018; Schostak, 2002; Walford, 2001) due to its strong social dimension; indeed, qualitative research investigates 'the intricate web of purposes, motives, interests, needs, demands, feelings and so on structured by the language we use to express ourselves to others and by which we orient our behaviour with theirs and they with us' (Schostak, 2002, p. 18). As such, qualitative research is based on data that cannot be measured, quantified and objectivised, but that characterises and describes a non-measurable reality.

In this research, qualitative data has been collected to illuminate the multifaceted realities of competition, which required the researcher to adopt a certain degree of sensitivity, openness to people's various experiences and, most importantly, responsibility for the interpretation of these data (Holloway & Biley, 2011); indeed, participants' viewpoints and feelings towards competition within the UoY Music Department are likely to be varied, displayed in many ways and informed by people's unique experiences of their life, within and beyond the University. Considering this, the data I collected were not only obtained through using specific qualitative research tools (e.g. interviews and questionnaires), but also involved reflection on my personal

engagement within this community which contributed to a deep, extensive knowledge of the many aspects that constituted the research environment.

### **3.3 Validity and reliability**

The appropriateness of applying the terms *validity* and *reliability* to qualitative research is part of ongoing discussion among researchers. While these terms' meanings are rooted in 'a logical-positivist paradigm' (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 30), their application within qualitative research is debated. The importance of this methodological debate resides on ensuring quality in qualitative work and has often involved discussion concerning the opportunity to substitute validity and reliability with new terms deemed more sympathetic of an interpretivist approach (Seale, 1999). However, as Long and Johnson (2000) observe, the use of alternative terms could be misleading as the results are often not dissimilar to the positivist meaning of validity and reliability.

Despite the traditional meaning of validity and reliability being often viewed as irrelevant to qualitative research (Krefting, 1991), these types of studies still need to demonstrate rigour by addressing these two concepts in a way that is relevant to qualitative research. I will use the terms validity and reliability to report how I have pursued rigour within this project; these are discussed in 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.

#### *3.3.1 Validity*

Using a qualitative perspective, Hammersley (1992) defines validity as an accurate representation of 'those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise' (p. 69). Consequently, addressing validity requires accepting with honesty the researcher's involvement in the research process, providing an accurate, in-depth representation of the research purposes, participants and process, as well as accounting for richness of data (Winter, 2000). In line with this conceptualisation, Cohen et al. (2018) propose validity in qualitative research to be situated within the research process and the role of the researcher, rather than in the findings.

To ensure validity in this project, I openly address issues of researcher bias through doing research in my own institution (section 3.8.4). I provide an accurate description of the research context and participants through peer debriefing and under

supervision (section 3.6). I detail the selection of participants, context and methods of data collection (Chapter 4) and have placed my research in relation to previous relevant literature (Chapter 2). Other issues of validity are addressed through triangulation of data (section 3.3.3) and respondent validation within the interviews (Chapter 4).

### *3.3.2 Reliability*

To some extent, the discussion among researchers regarding reliability is not dissimilar to that of validity; indeed, several definitions of reliability have been proposed (Long & Johnson, 2000), but they all focus on the standardisation of data collection instruments (Mason, 1996). While this could be a valid statement for quantitative research, in qualitative research 'all accounts are unique in that they represent the differing perspectives of different observers' (Armstrong et al., 1997, p. 605). Therefore, the consistency of data collection methods cannot ensure a high degree of reliability in interpretive research, where the different contexts do not account for replicability. Nevertheless, addressing the concept of reliability is important to ensure rigour. Given the specificity of each research context, Cohen et al. (2018) identified reliability as a matter of 'fidelity to real life, context- and situation-specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents (p. 271).

I provide a detailed overview of the research methods and methodology by discussing the measures put into place to ensure that the data obtained are aligned with my research questions (Chapter 4). Furthermore, I justify the choice of the data collection methods employed by making reference to ethical issues and openly outlining the advantages and disadvantages of each method (see 4.2.1 and 4.3.1). Due to ethical issues (detailed in Chapter 4), interviews were used only to collect data from the staff, while students were invited to complete a questionnaire. Reliability within the questionnaire was obtained by making sure that the questions gave participants the chance to answer honestly and openly; the responses were anonymous; a review of the questionnaire through feedback from more experienced academics and piloting supported the choice and ordering of questions, which included a number of open-ended questions. For the interviews, similar preparation processes ensured that



questions were phrased clearly; audio-recording was essential to provide a high degree of reliability in the transcription and data analysis (Gray, 2013).

### *3.3.3 Triangulation*

Long and Johnson (2000) claim that triangulation ‘commonly refers to the employment of multiple data sources, data collection methods, or investigators’ (p. 34). The traditional understanding of this multi-method approach places triangulation within a positivist paradigm (Blaikie, 1991) but, as others have observed, it can be successfully employed in interpretivist studies (Seale, 1999). However, Silverman (1993) contended that when applied in interpretivist studies, triangulation does not act as guarantee of validity but as a tool that can deepen the understanding of several aspects of a research topic.

In this regard, triangulation was considered in this project as an approach that helped the researcher obtain a multi-faceted view of experiences of competition in this department. This multi-perspective focus was essential to reach some degree of triangulation; indeed, I gave my interview participants the chance to contribute through ‘respondent validation’ (Long & Johnson, 2000). This means that they received their interview transcripts and had the chance to edit, delete or add data, which resulted in an enriched viewpoint. Another level of triangulation was added by collecting data not only from students but also from academic and administrative staff members of the department. While this research was aimed at investigating students’ multiple experiences of competition, these can be better understood by considering also the perspectives of other people who work in contact with students and are part of the environment where the research phenomenon – competition – takes place. A further level of triangulation was given by the complementary use of a typically quantitative method of data collection – the Likert scale – within the questionnaire administered to students to illuminate and enrich qualitative data gathered by the students.

## **3.4 Case study methodology: Theoretical framework**

This research focuses on obtaining an exploratory understanding of how individuals within the UoY Music Department view competition. As such, the research boundaries

are defined by the departmental context and this research is conducted as a case study; indeed, 'the central defining characteristic [of a case study] is concentration on a particular case (or small number of cases) studied in its own right' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 150).

While case studies have been traditionally dismissed as a type of 'soft' research, they are now recognised as a specific and formal research strategy thanks to academics such as Yin (2018) who have done much to give credit to this methodology; indeed, the understanding of such methodology has recently changed and tight definitions that bounded case studies within a closed system (Creswell, 1994) has been recently replaced by a more flexible approach that considers the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context more blurred (Yin, 2018). My aim to acknowledge the multiple realities of competition within a specifically bounded context certainly accommodates the relativist perspective of case studies (Boblin et al., 2013). Thus, this perspective informs the different methods of data collection, all aimed at capturing my participants' different views, opinions and meanings to shed light on the multifaceted aspects of competition within this particular department.

As this research was highly context-dependant, case study was deemed the most appropriate methodology. Consequently, awareness of the context is essential when researching real-life situations, as it is the case here. The researcher's open and flexible attitude becomes vital to uncover forms of competition that might arise among students within this department. On the other hand, even though the phenomenon and the context might not always be clearly distinguishable, the researcher must pursue a degree of rigour that places the boundaries of the inquiry within the context represented by the UoY Music Department. This meant acknowledging that my participants' understanding of competition and its effects on mental wellbeing are likely to be informed also by past experiences and other influences beyond the departmental context (e.g. family, schools, engagement in extra-curricular activities, cultural, social and economic background). As a result, reflexivity, engagement with literature on competition and methodological sources, and awareness of the context of the case study the design of the data collection methods to ensure that the data captured actually reflected participants' perspectives on types of competition that they experienced in the UoY Music Department. More details regarding the data collection methods design process will be given in Chapter 4.

### **3.5 The case study application within this research**

Case studies are a particularly suitable methodological path when three specific conditions arise: when the research questions are presented in the form of *how* and *why*, when the phenomenon investigated is a contemporary one and when the researcher has little to no control over the behavioural events (Yin, 2018). The aim of my research questions – some of which are *how* questions – is to investigate the processes that underpin music students' conceptualisations of competition within the UoY Music Department; indeed, the understanding of such processes and their implications on students' mental wellbeing could have relevance for policy makers and music educators in tertiary-level institutions. Even though findings cannot be statistically generalised, it may well be that similar processes could be observed in other comparable contexts.

As detailed previously, this research aligns with real-world research (section 3.2.1); as such, 'it takes place in highly complex and often volatile situations' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 4) that prevent the researcher from exerting any form of control over behavioural events. This distinctive feature places the research as opposite to study designs where experimental conditions are manipulated by the researcher, and it fits well not only with Yin's three conditions (2018), but also with definitions of case study that emphasise the in-depth analysis of an existing and complex system as the main characteristic of such methodology (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Interviews and questionnaires were utilised as data collection methods as they are particularly suitable for revealing the multifaceted aspects of a socially complex environment. As a researcher within a real life context, I did not exert any direct control on the research environment. However, as an insider and as a member who actively contributes to the academic and musical life of the department, I also contribute to shape in several ways the environment that I aim to investigate. This puts me in a potentially challenging position that will be extensively discussed in section 3.8.

Finally, the issue of generalisability is often considered as one of the most relevant concerns regarding case studies (Tsang, 2014). Generalising from one specific sample that is highly context-dependant is unrealistic and would result in a substantial methodological flaw. However, Yin (2018) points out that even 'physical and life sciences are rarely based on single experiments' (p. 20), and although statistical

generalisability is an unachievable goal for case studies, it is still possible to go beyond the specific case through analytic generalisation. This means that the implications of a case study must shed light on existing theoretical principles or ‘implicate new situations’ (Yin, 2018, p. 39). As such, the findings of my research will go beyond the immediate case study; indeed, the students’ perspectives of competition within the UoY Music Department might be relevant for other similar contexts (e.g. other UK music departments or conservatoires) and could inform future educational and departmental policies concerning the relationship between competition and music students’ mental wellbeing.

### **3.6 The research context: The University of York (UoY) Music Department**

This section is provided to not only give information on the research context but to also provide contextualised information which relates to the positionality of the researcher, detailed subsequently in section 3.8. About 450 students were registered on undergraduate and postgraduate courses at the Music Department, University of York at the time of the data collection (2019/2020). During this period the academic year ran from September to June and was split into three ten-week terms: Autumn (September-December), Spring (January-March) and Summer (April-June). For students enrolled on taught postgraduate degrees, the Summer term extended to September, the deadline for their final submission. Postgraduate research students, however, ‘are not ruled by the teaching term dates’ (University of York, n.d.) as they are not formally required to attend regular teaching sessions. Detailed information regarding the department’s educational offer and facilities is provided in the following sections. As an insider, I observed that before the Covid-19 outbreak, a strong sense of community seemed prevalent within this department. For instance, during term time, social spaces were often busy with groups of students and many student-led activities took place throughout the year involving students from different courses and years of study. Considering that the degree of closeness and similarity to a specific target is likely to enhance the sense of competition among individuals (Garcia et al., 2013), there is scope to believe that several perceptions of competition could be embedded in such an environment. Nevertheless, other aspects including environmental factors,

group dynamics and institutional features might impact students' perceptions of competition. Further details of the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within the research context are now provided.

### *3.6.1 Undergraduate courses*

This UoY Music Department offers two undergraduate degree programmes: BA in Music and BA in Music and Sound Recording (MASR). On a demographic level, at the time of the data collection there was a numerical imbalance between BA Music and MASR students, as the first group substantially outnumbered the second. The large majority of the overall undergraduate population was represented by British students with only a few students coming from European and non-European countries. Both courses are taught through a modular system that allows flexibility; this means that besides attending *core modules*, students choose between a set of *optional projects*<sup>14</sup> to suit best their individual interests. The majority of optional projects are not split by year group; this gives students the opportunity to meet and learn from peers with different levels of experience. Optional projects offer students the chance to engage flexibly with a wide range of music-related areas that include music psychology, music education, performance, composition, musical analysis, music production and recording, or projects on specific composers or genres (e.g. South-African jazz music). To comply with the university academic requirements, and to enable diversified understanding, the number of performance-based or composition-based projects that a student can choose throughout their degree is limited. Each student is allocated an academic supervisor who offers individual support and guidance throughout the three years (see below, 3.6.5).

While a wide range of musical activities as composition, music technology, performance, musical analysis is promoted through optional projects within both BA courses, MASR has a specific inclination toward the development of studio recording skills and music production. BA Music students are allocated an instrumental/vocal

---

<sup>14</sup> The School of Arts and Creative Technologies (University of York) website currently refers to these projects as 'optional modules'. However, Howell (1999) originally presented the elective units offered by the UoY Music Department as projects; thus, the word 'projects' will be used throughout this thesis to indicate these. For more information, see Howell, T. (1999). Freedom of choice: Project-based learning. In J. Barnes & G. Holt (Eds.), *Making Music Work – Professional integration project* (pp. 73-84).

teacher who support students in building their performing skills through individual tuition.

Third-year BA Music students are required to engage with an Independent study module, either in the form of a composition folio, a solo project – namely a piece of research designed by students – or an instrumental/vocal recital. All these three options are subdivided into a ‘major’ option, which is worth 40 credits and a ‘minor’ option, which is worth 20 credits. For example, a 40-credit recital is required to be 45 minutes long while a 20-credit one will last 30 minutes. MASR students are also required to engage with an Independent study module but only have a major 40-credit option; their submission may be an extended dissertation or a practical sound-recording based work accompanied with a commentary. Assessments are marked by module leaders and moderated by another member of the academic staff according to an established set of marking criteria made available to students through the course handbook. Year 1 students’ assessments are not moderated because marks obtained in Year 1 do not count towards students’ final grade. Writing-based assessments are submitted by students anonymously; this is not possible for performance-based assessments as the markers observe students. Independent study modules are assessed independently by two members of academic staff and the final grade results from the reconciliation of the two given marks. When appropriate (e.g. when the two marks are largely distant), a third marker may be involved in the marking process.

### *3.6.2 Postgraduate courses: taught and research*

The UoY Music Department offers a variety of postgraduate programmes mainly divided into two categories: taught courses and research courses. Postgraduate studies are aimed at providing a specialist knowledge of one specific area within the broader music field. Taught MA programmes are one-year courses (two years part-time). At the time of data collection, these programmes focussed on disciplines including instrumental and vocal performance, music education, music psychology, music production and composition, musicology, and community music. In terms of structure, there are similarities between taught postgraduate and undergraduate courses: they are both taught in class settings and written and practical assessment takes place throughout the year. The assessment and moderation process in place for undergraduate students applies to postgraduate students, who also have an assigned

academic supervisor that has the same role, functions and duties. Unlike third-year undergraduate students, postgraduates submit their Independent study modules in September of the year following their enrolment. The type of submission is dependent on their specialist field.

On a demographic level, however, there is a relevant difference between undergraduate and taught MA students: most of the MA students are international students, with a strong prevalence of Chinese students. This aligns with the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020) reporting a steady increase in the number of international students attending UK universities over recent years. Most of the taught Master students in the UoY Music Department attended their undergraduate course in their home countries or elsewhere outside the UK. Therefore, their perceptions of competition in this department are also informed by a culturally, socially, economically different background that may provide scope for comparison with their UK peers' understanding of competition. Thus, students' diversity is likely to result in an enriched insight into multiple perceptions of competition that do not result only from students' different personality but also from different cultural contexts.

A minority of postgraduate students, mainly from the UK, attend a one-year MA by research. This MA is highly research-focussed and independent work is prioritised; students conduct their own research on one specific musical discipline. The last category of postgraduate students in the department are doctoral researchers undertaking PhD study, comprising three years with a possible writing-up year to follow. During the first three years, these students undertake biannual meetings with a Thesis Advisory Panel (TAP) to review their progress and support their development. Formal reviews of progress take place during one of the two TAP meetings on annual basis, and the progression panel decides whether students have met or not the progression criteria set by the University to enter the next year of their degree; if these criteria are not met, students will have the opportunity to retake a formal review of progress within three months. In case of an unsuccessful second attempt, the panel may recommend the student to transfer to a different programme or to terminate their enrolment.

At the time of this research, the PhD student population was more heterogeneous, with a prevalence of UK students but a relevant minority of students from other European and non-European countries. In terms of competition, this

population is particularly interesting for two reasons: firstly, these students do not undergo any marked assessment within their programme. Furthermore, PhD students are part of a research community of specialists on their discipline; some of them are funded by scholarships, and some of them are employed as Graduate Teaching Assistants, meaning that they facilitate some undergraduate and/or MA teaching within the department. Therefore, different feelings of competition might arise among this category.

### *3.6.3 Departmental spaces and facilities*

The Music Department at the University of York comprises three buildings: one main building and two smaller ones, where main lectures, seminars, one-to-one instrumental and vocal lessons, ensemble rehearsals and individual practice take place. At the time of the data collection, around 25 practice rooms were provided in the three buildings and students could book rooms for individual and group practice and private teaching through an online system; room booking is regulated by a departmental policy on the daily maximum amount of booking hours for each student to ensure fairness and equality of opportunities among students. The facilities include five seminar rooms where most lectures and group activities take place.

The Music Research Centre (opened in 2004) is mainly devoted to those studying electroacoustic music, sound recording and mixed media works. This area contains a studio suite, an Auditorium and other relevant Music Production and Technology facilities. To support a quiet environment for studio work, this area is physically distant from the practice rooms and other noisier areas of the department. Two other studios are located in other areas of the department.

A space for students to relax and socialise is located in a foyer area within the main building, but its location just outside the main Concert Hall requires it to become a quiet area during concerts or recording sessions. In terms of facilities, the department has a number of instruments that students may borrow, and other specific instruments whose use must be specifically authorised by members of the academic staff. The department also provides a Gamelan room with a set of Javanese Gamelan and Thai Pi-Phat instruments; this room is available to students by permission only.



### *3.6.4 Performance opportunities and other opportunities*

Performance is highly valued within the UoY Music Department. Students from all courses – taught and research, undergraduate and postgraduate – have the opportunity to participate in ensembles and give public performances. Performance opportunities are provided both by the department and by student-led groups; furthermore, students can autonomously undertake informal, friendly performances by booking performance spaces within the department.

Performance opportunities provided by the department are first and foremost embedded within the yearly *Concert Series* hosted by the department; this attracts a significant number of the general public. Concerts are held once or twice a week during term-time in the main Hall and most departmental ensembles will perform at least once a year within the *Concert Series*, providing students with the opportunity to give public performances. While some ensembles require auditions (e.g. the University of York Symphony Orchestra), others are open to all students (e.g. the University Choir) to guarantee all students a chance to perform, regardless of individual performing abilities; this is particularly relevant in light of BA Music students' requirement to participate in at least one departmental ensemble every year. Other relevant opportunities provided by the department include some performance classes, masterclasses and concerto auditions. Performance classes and masterclasses are led by members of staff and external guests, focussing on specific instruments and elements of performance; for masterclasses, selected students have the chance to play and receive individual feedback. A more selective performance opportunity is provided through an audition for performing solo works (e.g. a concerto), offered every year to second-year undergraduates and other students who will be still studying in the following academic year. The auditions are assessed by two members of academic staff whose expertise is in performance studies. The outcome of successful auditions (the chance to perform a concerto or a work for soloists with a large ensemble within the Concert Series), is subject to approval by the Orchestral Committee and the Concerts Committee.

Some opportunities are provided by other organisations. The Music Society, a student-led organisation, organises 45-minute lunchtime concerts twice a week during term time. All students are welcome to submit an application for these concerts, and unlike the departmental performance opportunities, there are no repertoire and

instrumentation requirements; this provides students with greater ownership of performing choices.

While opportunities in musical performance outnumber those in other areas, students have also the chance to engage with other musical interests. Composers, for example, can submit their compositions to be reviewed and accepted for performance by a student-led contemporary ensemble which gives termly concerts of students' work. Students engaging with music production may also record performances throughout the academic year and arrange individually with other students to undertake studio recording sessions. Prizes are awarded at undergraduate level to students who have made distinguished contributions to specific areas including academic writing, performance, sound recording, and composition.

### *3.6.5 The academic staff*

The academic staff of the UoY Music Department is made up of a group of professionals specialised in their field. Most of the academic teaching in the department is led by the academic staff. Staff also have a pastoral role as each student is assigned an academic staff supervisor; their role is to guide the student through their studies and monitor progress on an individual basis. The supervisors provide at least two individual meetings with their supervisees each term. The pastoral role of academic supervisors is of vital importance not only because they represent a first point of contact to students (Haddon, 2019b), but also because they might be able to spot the signs of poor mental health and signpost students to relevant, qualified professionals.

### *3.6.6 The administrative staff*

The UoY Music Department also includes several administrators whose role is to ensure a smoothly running department. They also have a direct relationship with students as they manage relevant communications, provide technical assistance and also signpost students to other relevant support services they might need. Their contact with students is not regulated by a degree programme, but as their work takes place within one of the three buildings of the Music Department, this physical

proximity with students' spaces supports a certain degree of regular contact between students and administrative staff.

The department offers assistantships to postgraduate students within the administrative area (e.g. Office Assistant at the departmental reception desk). This provides some students with the chance to gain work experience in the department under the supervision of an administrator.

### *3.6.7 Instrumental and vocal teachers*

The UoY Music Department has many instrumental and vocal teachers who provide one-to-one lessons to students. All BA Music students are guaranteed one-to-one tuition as part of their study programme, while other students can arrange private lessons directly with these teachers, subject to their availability. The role of these teachers is essential not only to guarantee a degree of continuity in students' performance pathway throughout their studies, but also for their relationship with students; indeed, the individual contact hours they have with undergraduate students exceeds that of academic supervisors and other members of staff across the academic year. As such, the student/teacher relationship in this context is of particular relevance, for teachers might represent a source of support for students that goes beyond the curricular perspective.

## **3.7 Other relevant contexts: The University support services**

The University of York offers students a variety of sources of help and advice on several aspects of students' life. Among these, the provision of mental health and wellbeing support is the most relevant for the purpose of this research. The first point of contact for students with emotional, psychological and mental health difficulties is Open Door, a team of mental health practitioners offering a wide range of free support to students from all departments. The type of support offered by Open Door is subject to variability depending on the student's needs and specific circumstances; this might include extended confidential psychological support or it might be more limited when appropriate.

Other relevant services include a nightline that is operated by trained students aimed at offering support outside the usual working hours, and a number of specialised support services for specific categories of students; for example, international students, students with disabilities, students with children. Furthermore, specific emphasis is put on the role of academic supervisor and students' colleges, which are considered 'at the heart of [students'] support network' (University of York, n.d.). Each student at the UoY is assigned to one of 11 colleges designed to provide specific services and opportunities. Each college has a wellbeing team available to students throughout their degree programme to help them manage both the challenges of their university life and their wellbeing, and their facilities are open to students regardless of whether they live within the college or externally.

The University of York website has information pages dedicated to students' support and wellbeing, signposting additional relevant services outside the University, including contacts of other sources available across the city and nationally. This branched structure is aimed at responding appropriately to students' diverse needs and situations, and it enables departmental support providers (e.g. academic supervisors) to signpost students to a structured support system run by professionals, when relevant.

### **3.8 The researcher positionality**

As clarified earlier, this research is a case study that took place in a selected UK university music department. It is important to address my role as an insider-researcher, defined as someone 'who chose to study a group to which they belong' (Breen, 2007, p. 163). My involvement within the selected department requires careful consideration in light of my positions as a researcher, PhD student, Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), Office Assistant at the Reception desk, piano accompanist and instrumental/vocal teacher. These capacities had an impact on the development of my research in relation to multiple aspects including research design, data collection promotion, analysis and writing. Nonetheless, an insider researcher has to remain aware of the potential difficulties emerging from this position, which could involve conflicting roles, researcher bias, and assumptions originating from prior knowledge; therefore, the next sections detail the efforts made by the researcher to acknowledge

and deal with positive and negative factors related to my position as an insider researcher.

### *3.8.1 The research position: The research context*

The UoY Music Department represents a unique context for investigation in light of its educational specificities; indeed, its educational offer at undergraduate level based on a combination of academic and practical subjects makes it a privileged site for a research project whose aim is to explore music students' multiple perceptions of competition in higher education. Similarly, the diversity of the multiple postgraduate pathways, which include a number of musical specialties (e.g. performance, composition, teaching, researching, musicology, music production), make this department a potentially rich source of data and therefore suitable for the scope of this research.

Depth was a key factor in the decision to conduct research exclusively in the UoY institution. While a comparative study was considered in the first phases of this research, my various roles within the department allowed this research to be informed by in-depth knowledge of the research context; indeed, beyond pre-existing knowledge gathered as a PhD student, my roles as a GTA and Office assistant have given me access to information regarding teaching and administrative aspects of the department. Furthermore, due to my pre-existing knowledge of the UoY Music Department, I envisaged a risk of inadvertently undertaking an imbalanced approach to research design, data collection, analysis and writing in conducting a comparative study with another institution. For these reasons, a single case study has been deemed appropriate for this research.

### *3.8.2 Advantages and disadvantages of being an insider-researcher*

The insider perspective entails several advantages, including a deeper understanding of the selected context, a more spontaneous interaction and a higher degree of closeness with participants (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Insider researchers are more likely than external researchers to gain privileged access to data collection (Unluer, 2012), and the degree of closeness with participants 'promotes both the telling and the judging of truth' (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002, p. 9). In my case, these advantages

enabled a close understanding of departmental dynamics and practices as well as greater approachability to both students and staff. The satisfactory response rate obtained from staff members, particularly in light of academic staff's increasing workload (Houston et al., 2006), may be partly dependent on their willingness to support the research of someone they knew within their institution. The insider researcher may also have an advantage when 'the study is about culture and way of life of certain community' (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016, p. 851), for they are unlikely to experience what could be described as a cultural shock that external researchers might encounter in researching in unfamiliar environments. Another relevant aspect to consider is that insider researchers tend to 'have a passion about the topic they have been working on' (Saidin & Yaacob, 2016, p. 850) as they research aspects of the culture they operate in, which is likely to result in commitment and dedication; this passion sustained me through the years of PhD research, and may also have facilitated research participation through awareness of certain individuals (staff, instrumental/vocal teachers and some students) of my commitment to my research

Despite the advantages, the position of the insider-researcher also entails concerns that must be carefully considered. Trowler (2011) observed that the high level of familiarity with the research context may result in the insider researcher failing to notice some aspects due to their overconfidence; for example, particular approaches to teaching or to curriculum design. Furthermore, 'greater familiarity can lead to a loss of objectivity' (Unluer, 2012, p. 1) as the insider researcher's evaluation of participants' answers, institutional practices and social dynamics is likely to be conditioned by the researcher's own experience and perspective. In this regard, it is crucial that the researcher remains aware of the partiality of their pre-existing knowledge. There is also the problem that participants may be unwilling to share ideas, concepts and materials to someone they know; Walford (2012) observed that this aspect is particularly relevant when researching in environments where a hierarchical structure is embedded, as participants might be concerned that what they disclose could impact on their professional position. Therefore, for this research I had to carefully consider how to phrase questions and which steps to take to avoid resistance to collaborate from people in a higher hierarchical position. In particular, I thoroughly explained in the *Information sheet for staff* (see Appendix A) that all of my interview questions were aimed at gaining insight into students' perceptions of

competition and no questions would be asked about staff members' personal experiences with competition. This measure has hopefully limited staff concerns and increased their willingness to share frank opinions, ideas and thoughts. Lastly, as noticed by Trowler (2011), issues of anonymity must be carefully considered by insider researchers as the potential for identification in the research output is higher than in studies conducted by external researchers. More details concerning anonymity is provided in Chapter 4 (section 4.5.1).

### *3.8.3 My position as an insider researcher*

Being an insider researcher facilitated the design of the two data collection methods that have been used in this research: interviews and questionnaires. As explained above, pre-existing knowledge of the structures, procedures and characteristics of the department allowed me to detect some key areas where competitive feelings were more likely to arise. My personal experience also played a role in the identification of these areas; having competed in 2019 for the departmental concerto audition<sup>15</sup> I witnessed first-hand the competitiveness attached to this opportunity. Similarly, being an accompanist for final-year recitalists enabled me to gain understanding of the whole preparation process, students' practical and emotional involvement and potential feelings of competition, either directed at themselves or their peers.

However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic had a direct impact on my capability to promote my research within the physical space of the department, as it prevented me from reaching out to students in person and making the most of the visibility that my role as an Office Assistant afforded me. Thanks to online teaching provision, I managed to promote my questionnaires among postgraduate taught students in my GTA capacity, and my belonging to the postgraduate researchers' community may have contributed to encourage some PhD students to fill in my questionnaire. Nonetheless, the first UK lockdown prevented me from making the most of my visibility within the department, which could have been particularly helpful with regard to collecting data from undergraduate students.

Being an insider partly facilitated the data collection, particularly in relation to follow-up questions during interviews which were often informed by my own

---

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 1, section 1.2.

knowledge of topics covered by participants. Most importantly, though, the data analysis process has been partly influenced by my role as an insider researcher, as I remained aware that the interpretation of the findings may have been to some extent filtered by my pre-existing knowledge of departmental features. In this regard, my awareness of the researcher bias required me to take particular steps (detailed in the next section) to 'minimize this potential bias' (Fleming, 2018, p. 313) and ensure credibility and transparency to the research process.

#### *3.8.4 Steps taken to deal with insider researcher-related challenges*

The specific features of this research required me, as the researcher, to account for those biases that could potentially affect the credibility of this work; indeed, while qualitative research methods demand special attention in terms of biases (Mehra, 2002), my position as an insider entailed the obvious risk of being too closely involved within the research context to ensure objectivity (Mercer, 2007).

The first important step I took to minimise researcher bias was the acknowledgement of how my personal beliefs, values and past experiences influenced my approach toward the research subject (Mehra, 2002). My background as a former conservatoire music student, peer of other music students, and instrumental teacher certainly informed my interest toward competition and mental health (as detailed in Chapter 1); on the other hand, the subjectivity of my own perspective must be recognised (Breen, 2007). By engaging with a substantial number of studies on both competition and music as well as methodological issues to be mindful of as an insider researcher, I committed myself to ensure a high degree of objectivity to finalise research questions that were relevant in relation to existing literature; my research questions emerged through consideration of literature and gave me the opportunity to consider related aspects of competition and mental health that derived from my own beliefs and personal experience.

The risk of falling into researcher bias was considered also in relation to the design of the research methods – questionnaires and interviews – as well as the data analysis process. Before designing the questions for both questionnaires and interviews, I tried to counter-effect such aspects by a critical examination of my own assumptions, as suggested by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) and by attempting to interfere as little as possible in the data collection process. In particular, I have



undertaken a high degree of reflection trying to question how my experiences may inadvertently facilitate assumptions in relation to which areas could foster higher or lower feelings of competition among students. For example, my experiences as a former conservatoire student naturally led me to identify musical performance as a particularly competitive domain, but further reflection on the institutional differences between conservatoires and university music departments, which also entail a strong academic component, made me question this assumption. In this regard, informal conversations with peers, conversations with my partner who is also a musician, and careful discussions with my academic supervisor supported me in this process. A similar process of individual reflection, engagement with literature, discussion with peers and my academic supervisor has been undertaken during the data analysis phases, to ensure fairness and objectivity in the interpretation of the findings.

Pilot tests are also a powerful tool to address biases as they represent an opportunity for the researcher to check, revise and edit questions (Chenail, 2011). These tests were run with selected students prior to questionnaire distribution and two pilot interviews were conducted with one staff member and one instrumental/vocal teacher. At the end of the questionnaire, pilot respondents were asked to provide feedback on the relevance of questions, appropriateness and length of questionnaire and to suggest changes whenever necessary. The same piloting process also applied to the interviews; I revised my questions and the interview process according to participant feedback. Furthermore, I sent all of my participants their interview transcript, inviting them to make changes to the transcript before it was entered into the data analysis.

During the data collection, I remained aware of hierarchical positions within the department. While I do not regard my research as having been highly influenced by a strong political element, compared to that of other postgraduate insider researchers (Keegan-Phipps, 2008), I certainly had to exercise caution in interviewing people who occupy a higher hierarchical position within the institution, to avoid the risk of receiving bland answers or putting them in unnecessary difficult positions by asking questions that were beyond the scope of my research; as stated in 3.8.2, I committed myself to not asking staff members and instrumental teachers questions about their own personal experiences of competition.

Lastly, reflection on my autobiographical experience of having been raised and educated (up to the end of my undergraduate studies) in another European country has been done in relation to my insider position; indeed, my direct involvement within UK higher education culture has been limited to postgraduate studies. Therefore, my cultural distance from other students' perceptions of competition – in particular undergraduate students – within a UK music department may have positively contributed to ensure fairness, objectivity and credibility.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter examined the research design of this study; in particular, the philosophical standpoint that situates this research within the interpretive paradigm has been discussed and aspects connected to validity and reliability have been articulated. The methodology of this study was also addressed; in particular, the rationale for a case study research has been established. Furthermore, some information was provided in relation to the research context, namely the Music Department within the University of York; indeed, doing this was functional to situate the researcher's position within the research, which was particularly relevant to address in relation to the researcher's insider status.

The next chapter will delineate other methodological aspects by providing an overview of the data collection methods, detailing the data analysis process and articulating ethical concerns related to this research.

# **Chapter 4: Research methods, data analysis, ethical considerations**

## **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter will explain advantages and disadvantages of the methods of data collection, and detail how the methods of data collection have been designed, distributed and analysed. The methods of data collection used in this research were semi-structured interviews and three questionnaires that included both open-ended questions and three Likert scale surveys. The data analysis process will then be detailed and ethical considerations related to this research will be addressed.

## **4.2 Questionnaires**

### *4.2.1 Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires*

Questionnaires are based on a series of standardised questions or, more appropriately, items used to gather data from respondents. As such, questionnaires are the data collection method of surveys, which ‘provide access to what large numbers of people feel, do, and think, offering insights into their attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions’ (Williamon et al., 2021, p. 155) without intervening actively in people’s lives: for this reason, surveys are generally non-experimental (Williamon et al., 2021). To fulfil this aim, researchers using questionnaires should pay attention to phrase items in a comprehensible and clear way, pay attention to the position of questions and consider practical issues related to a functional questionnaire distribution and response rate (Flick, 2020).

Questionnaires are relatively straightforward methods of data collection: they tend to be less time-consuming and expensive than interviews, do not require the presence of the researcher and questionnaire data are ‘often comparatively straightforward to analyse’ (Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, they produce a high amount of data standardisation (Robson & McCartan, 2016), which enables ‘high reliability of response’ (p. 247). Questionnaires are ideally suitable for producing a substantial amount of data, even though Robson and McCartan (2016) argued that

they often have a low response rate. However, questionnaires are particularly functional in relation to respondents' anonymity concerns; their inherent anonymity 'encourages respondents to be truthful' (Patten, 2017, p. 2). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that questionnaires may elicit reasonably honest responses.

Nonetheless, the use of questionnaires is also subject to disadvantages that tend to be related to their descriptive and static nature. Williamon et al. (2021) noted that 'surveys have fixed designs, so there is no opportunity to change or adapt questions once data collection has begun' (p. 157). Due to this limitation, the researcher will not have the opportunity to adjust the questions flexibly in the attempt to counter the bias that respondents may be swayed by when providing socially desirable rather than honest responses (Patten, 2017). However, as argued above, it must be noted that anonymity is likely to countereffect this bias when compared to other data collection methods (e.g. interviews) where the lack of anonymity may induce participants to be even more aware of the social desirability of their responses. Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2018) argued that the lack of flexibility may result in unsophisticated and 'superficial scope of the data' (p. 471) as they do 'not reveal the rich context and texture that in-depth interviews can provide' (Patten, 2017, p. 3); indeed, the absence of the researcher as well as situational factors related to respondents' individual motivation, involvement and interest in the subject (Robson & McCartan, 2016) may impact the type and richness of responses. In light of these limitations, the design phase is particularly important to build an effective questionnaire.

#### *4.2.2 Questionnaire design*

The preparation of the questionnaires was demanding and required a considerable amount of time carefully reviewing existing literature, comparing methodological resources, talking to students and staff in the UoY Music Department to identify competition-related areas of interest and reflecting on how to best word the questions prior to the piloting phase and subsequent final distribution. The lack of pre-existing data collection instruments in the area of inquiry as well as the uniqueness of the research context resulted in an original questionnaire almost entirely designed by the researcher, excepting some Likert scale statements that were derived from the Revised Competitiveness Index (Houston et al., 2002) and from a survey distributed to UK

higher education students to gather insights into students' mental health (Pereira et al., 2018).

The questionnaires included several open questions to allow respondents freedom of response; indeed, 'an open-ended question can catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour which [...] are hallmarks of valid qualitative data' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 475). In some circumstances, closed questions in the form of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions have been asked; indeed, this choice enables the researcher to gather information on respondents' opinions on a restricted number of options or scale ratings (Cohen et al., 2018)<sup>16</sup>.

As it is often the case with questionnaires, the literature review supported the preparation in the first stage (Arthur et al., 2012); awareness of well-investigated areas and gaps within existing research facilitated the identification of potential broad themes of interest. Simultaneously, the definition of themes of interest was supported by conversations within the UoY Music Department with other students and staff members as well as by insights originating from my own experience as a former MA student and current PhD student. Furthermore, in this phase, the reading of methodological sources was essential to understand how to negotiate within the questionnaire the effects deriving from the insider researcher position, affording pre-existing and partial knowledge of the research context. In this regard, a great deal of reflexivity has been undertaken, detailed in Chapter 3 (section 3.8).

The necessity to align the questionnaire with my research questions and, therefore, ensure the reliability of this research (Robson & McCartan, 2016), informed the decision to design three different questionnaires, one for each category of student: undergraduate, taught postgraduate (MA) and PhD students. Assuming that the curricular and demographic specificities of each category of students are likely to produce different experiences and attitudes within higher education, the choice to differentiate the questionnaires was intended to produce a flexible instrument aimed at capturing the perceptions of competition of each category. Lastly, some questions asked of MA and PhD students were informed by the sequential distribution of the questionnaires; indeed, the analysis of the responses to the first questionnaire

---

<sup>16</sup> The three questionnaires distributed to BA, PhD and Taught MA Music students are presented in Appendix F. The link to the data set including respondents' answers to the questionnaires is presented in Appendix D.

administered – namely the one for undergraduate students – supported the identification of minor issues within some questions, particularly in relation to unnecessary repetition, wording and order of questions. Thus, a few amendments were made to improve the quality of the two remaining questionnaires.

#### *4.2.2.1 The pilot phase*

The pilot test allows the researcher to test ‘specific aspects of a study with a group of participants before full data collection begins’ (Williamon et al., 2021, p. 145). Prior to distribution, the questionnaires were piloted with UoY Music Department students from each of the three categories: undergraduate, taught postgraduate and PhD. Four BA students – two enrolled in the BA Music programme and two in the BA MASR – did the pilot test for the questionnaire designed for undergraduate students. Two MAs and one PhD student were asked to pilot the questionnaires respectively for postgraduate students and PhDs. The pilot questionnaires were distributed via the online survey software Qualtrics. The difference in the number of students for each category reflected the numerical differences among the categories of the department where at the time of data collection undergraduate students were more numerous, followed by MAs and PhDs.

The students were suggested by some of the UoY Music Department academic staff members in light of their involvement with their course and were invited to take part in the pilot test via email; all of them agreed and completed the questionnaire in 1-2 days following the invitation. Through a consent form placed at the beginning of the questionnaire, students were informed about the aims of the research, use of data and compliance with ethical standards. After the questionnaire, they were asked to provide feedback through some questions in a Word document (see Appendix C) regarding the length, clarity and relevance of the questionnaire. Space for any additional comments was also provided. In light of the influence that length of questionnaires has on the response rate (Arthur et al., 2012), this aspect was been carefully considered and adjusted according to the feedback received from the pilot tests.

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak the pilot phase had to take place remotely; however, this is likely to have had a positive impact, particularly on the feedback process, as students may have felt more able to deliver honest feedback (Patten,

2017), even though feedback was not anonymous. In light of the feedback received, some minor changes were made to the order or the phrasing of the questions.

### *4.2.3 Questionnaire distribution*

The questionnaires were distributed online; Robson and McCartan (2016) defined this type of distribution as *self-completion*, where 'respondents fill in the answers by themselves' (p. 250). As explained above (4.2.2), the questionnaires were distributed sequentially: the one for undergraduate students was administered in April 2020, followed by the questionnaire for MA students (early June 2020) and, lastly, the questionnaire for PhD students (late June 2020). The timing of the distribution was carefully considered in order to avoid clashes with students' relevant academic commitments: the questionnaire for undergraduate students was distributed after students had already submitted most of their end-of-spring-term assessed work. Due to the differentiated assessment deadlines among MA pathways, the same principle was not applicable to MA students; instead, the questionnaire for them was distributed in the second half of the summer term, after most of the teaching took place. The individual nature of PhD work did not enable specific considerations for PhD students; however, a late June questionnaire distribution was purportedly distanced from their TAP meetings that usually take place in February and September (see Chapter 3).

All the three questionnaires were distributed online via Qualtrics, and students were informed that data from the questionnaire would be collected anonymously and any references to their or others' identity would be removed by the researcher prior to data analysis. Due to the first lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak, the questionnaire distribution and subsequent promotion took place exclusively online. The questionnaires were distributed by a member of the administrative staff; two reminders, spaced within a week, were emailed to students. The impossibility to be physically present in the department at the time of the first lockdown impaired my ability to promote the questionnaire in person in a structured and regular manner; however, I made the most of my personal relationships and professional role as a GTA and Office Assistant by asking colleagues, friends and some staff members who had online contact with students, to promote my questionnaires. The questionnaires were closed one month after the second reminder.

## 4.3 Interviews

### 4.3.1 *Advantages and disadvantages of interviews*

Interviews were used within this research as a method of data collection because they 'help researchers to understand what is meaningful to people and allow participants to explain aspects of their lives in their own words' (Williamon et al. 2021, p. 129).

Interviews are well suited for case study research; they are an appropriate instrument to gather exploratory information about relatively under-researched domains, particularly in relation to participants' opinions, thought processes, feelings as these are often impractical to observe (Williamon et al., 2021). Due to the social nature of the interviews where the researcher exerts a more participative role than in questionnaires, Cohen et al. (2018) views knowledge emerging from interviews as co-constructed rather than solely produced by the interviewee.

The flexibility of interviews – particularly evident within open interviews and semi-structured ones – gives researchers the opportunity to adjust their line of enquiry and modify their approach to the interview or questions based on participants' responses (Doody & Noonan, 2013). As such, flexibility can be regarded as the main advantage of interviews. Furthermore, Robson and McCartan (2016) noted that body language cues may emerge from face-to-face interviews, potentially providing the researcher with another type of information which may support or disregard the verbal responses. Two further strengths of interviews were identified by Doody and Noonan (2013): they are a suitable tool for participants with reading or writing difficulties, and may represent a stimulating platform for participants to talk about themselves, even though in some circumstances this may result in over-talking and difficult data handling (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The disadvantages of interviews have been well summarised by Cohen et al. (2018): 'interviews are expensive in time, they are open to interviewer bias, they may be inconvenient for respondents, interview fatigue may hamper the interview and anonymity might be difficult' (p. 506). Online synchronous interviews, which were used for this research, may save time and costs associated with face-to-face interviews (Flick, 2020); however, 'biases are difficult to rule out' as doing so requires 'a degree of professionalism that does not come easily' (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 286).



Moreover, the lack of anonymity embedded in interviews makes this data collection tool particularly subjected to a social desirability bias among participants (Patten, 2017).

### *4.3.2 Interview design and preparation*

The design process started in August 2020, a few weeks after closing the questionnaires. A semi-structured format was used; this allows the researcher 'to collect a core of comparable data across a group of participants while also allowing information to emerge from individual voices that may be new or surprising to the researcher' (Williamon et al., 2021). The interviews were conducted between September 2020 and June 2022 with instrumental and vocal teachers (IVTs) and members of the academic and administrative staff of the UoY Music Department. While ethical concerns prompted the researcher to use questionnaires to collect data from music students, interviews seemed appropriate for IVTs and staff members; indeed, the ethical committee that approved this research did not qualify them as vulnerable categories and agreed for interviews to be conducted on the basis of all of the questions being focused on participants' perspectives on their music students' perceptions of competition. As suggested by Williamon et al. (2021), the interview design was driven by the research questions. More specifically, existing literature and methodological sources, personal reflexivity and discussions with peers and staff members informed the question design<sup>17</sup>.

#### *4.3.2.1 Sequential data collection*

Cameron (2009) defines a sequential data collection form as a particular type of data collection where 'one type of data provides a basis for collection of another type of data' (p. 144). As explained above, a number of elements informed the design of the interviews, including engagement with literature, reflexivity and discussions. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to define the interview design as purely sequential. However, a partially sequential principle has been followed within the design of the interview questions on two levels: on a primary level, to capture data

---

<sup>17</sup> The interview questions are presented in Appendix J. The link to the dataset including the interview transcripts is presented in Appendix D.

that fulfilled the aim of this research, several questions mirrored those asked to students within the questionnaires; the wording and the scope of the questions were adapted in relation to the different category of participant. In this sense, the sequential phases of the research, with questionnaire administration first and then the interviews, informed the interview design. On a second level, the semi-structured characterisation of the interviews allowed some flexibility and, therefore, some questions were adjusted, added or removed when appropriate on the basis of the responses obtained in previous interviews. However, to ensure consistency of data and, thus, the reliability of this research, the extent to which this second process took place was rather limited in scope.

#### *4.3.2.2 The pilot interviews*

After a careful question design, two pilot interviews were conducted with one teacher and one academic staff member; Williamon et al. (2021) suggest that a number between two and four pilot participants are required for interview studies. A pilot test was not conducted with administrators for multiple reasons: first, due to their limited sample size; second, because their inclusion within this research was decided at a later stage; third, because in light of their later involvement the researcher had already developed familiarity with the interview process; fourth, the questions asked to administrators were almost identical to those asked to academic staff members. The two interviewees who took part in the pilot phase were identified by the researcher in relation to their proximity to students though involvement with teaching and other additional activities within the department; in doing so, I was guided by the principle that pilot tests should be conducted with individuals that are representative of the larger group of investigation (Williamon et al., 2021).

In preparation for the pilot interviews, Creswell's interview protocol (2009) was followed to make sure to observe all the relevant steps that account for a transparent interview process. Prior to the interviews, the two participants were provided with an information sheet, asked to sign a consent form and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Both pilot tests provided the researcher with useful feedback both in relation to the clarity of the questions, their relevance and ordering, and the overall length of the interview. In light of the relevance of the responses received, participants were subsequently asked for permission to use their data as part of the data set.

### *4.3.3 The interview process*

The first round of interviews took place with instrumental and vocal teachers (IVTs) between October and December 2020. The interviews with academic staff members took place between March and April 2021 while the interviews with administrative staff members took place in July 2022. In October 2020, all IVTs employed by the UoY Music Department at that time received an interview invitation email to take part in this research project which included an information sheet covering the project aims, data protection policy, anonymity, participants' rights, and use of data. Initially, the request was sent by a departmental administrator to the mailing list of all IVTs; due to a low response rate, a second email was sent individually to each teacher one week later. 14 teachers accepted the request to participate; 12 agreed to be interviewed via Zoom while one participant preferred a telephone interview and one other an email interview. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine how many teachers agreed to participate in relation to the total number of IVTs who received the invitation emails because it was subsequently discovered that the teachers' mailing list was not up to date at that time and included some teachers who were no longer working for the department.

A similar process applied to the interviews with academic (AcSM) and administrative (AdSM) staff members; however, as their contact details are public on the department website, the email was sent directly by the researcher. In March 2021, 25 AcSM employed by the UoY Music Department at that time received an interview invitation email to take part in this research project and ten of them accepted to take part in the research. Data from 11 AcSM (ten participants plus the pilot participant) will be presented and discussed in subsequent chapters. All these interviews were conducted on Zoom.

The interviews with AdSM were conducted face-to-face in July 2022: five AdSM received an interview invitation email from the researcher and three of them decided to take part while the other two declined. In total, data from three AdSM out of the five who were invited will be presented and discussed. In consideration of their similar contractual positions within the department, their physical presence in the department and contact hours with the students, data from both academic and administrative members of the staff is discussed together in Chapter 9.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Prior to audio-recording, (in order to be able to transcribe the data) I followed Cohen et al.'s recommendations (2018) regarding the start of interviews: I debriefed participants on the interview process, aims of the research project, reminded them that they would have had the opportunity to review the transcript, and asked if they had questions and notified them before turning the recording device on. All the interviews began with an open-ended starter question (Williamon et al., 2021) to gather an understanding of participants' feelings in relation to students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department. Subsequently, the questions asked were open-ended as they 'allow [the researcher] to go into more depth or clear up any misunderstandings' (Robson & McCartan, 2021, p. 289). Questions were at times interspersed by probes and prompts, to seek clarification, to extend the narrative of participants' accounts and to invite them to give examples when necessary (Gillham, 2000). At the end of each interview, I finished by thanking my participant and asked if they had any further questions.

#### *4.3.3.1 The interview transcripts*

As stated by Oliver et al. (2005), transcripts are an important step for the researcher to get immersed in the data; therefore, taking into account the variance in the type of potential transcripts, from brief summaries to full transcripts (Williamon et al., 2021), my transcripts mostly provided a verbatim account of the interviews, excluding only parts that compromised participants' anonymity or were obviously outside the scope of the research.

All participants were asked whether they would like to see the transcript of their interview before the start of the data analysis process. Those who requested the transcript were allowed two full weeks to check it and make any changes they wished; they were granted the possibility to extend the deadline, if needed. Participants were informed that in the case of no further communication from them within two weeks after receiving the transcript, the researcher would assume their approval.

#### *4.3.4 The telephone interview and the email interview*

Two instrumental and vocal teachers agreed to take part in the research but preferred to be interviewed via phone call (P12\_IVTs) or via email (P6\_IVTs). While the telephone interview is a synchronous method of data collection as the communication between the researcher and the interviewee occurs in real time, the email interview involved a full set of questions emailed to P6\_IVTs, which ‘comes close to what you do in a questionnaire study’ (Flick, 2020, p. 243). Both these methods are accepted within the research community as they entail some advantages, as evidenced by Robson and McCartan (2016): they are both relatively cheap and less subjected to biases due to the lack of visual cues given by the researcher’s physical presence, even though Opdenakker (2006) correctly argues that the absence of visual cues is a disadvantage for researchers as they do not have access to extra information provided by the interviewee’s body language. Furthermore, email interviews allow more time for the participant to reflect. On the other hand, concerns relating to the length of the data collection process within these methods, impersonality and potential restricted access to technological devices are clear limitations (Robson & McCartan).

However, as suggested by a study from Ratislavova and Ratislav (2014), asynchronous methods of data collection are particularly suitable for participants who may not be willing to disclose their feelings and experiences in a more threatening face-to-face context. Thus, I gave these participants the opportunity to contribute to the research in a more convenient way; the semi-structured nature of the interview was substantially not altered within the telephone interview with P12\_IVT as the synchronicity gave me the opportunity to ask follow-up questions. This was not possible within the email interview; therefore, the questions included some standardised ones that were asked to all interviewees and other questions derived from reflection and analysis of the previous interviews<sup>18</sup>.

## **4.4 Data analysis**

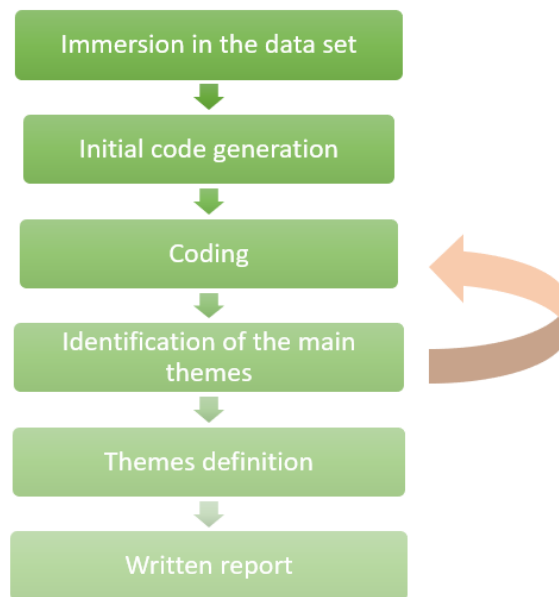
This research involved a qualitative analysis. While descriptive statistics measuring the central tendency and variability of corresponding items (Boone & Boone, 2012) can be used to analyse data from Likert scales, for the purpose of this research, individual

---

<sup>18</sup> The email interview questions are presented in Appendix E.

respondents' answers have been analysed. In particular, the researcher has compared and contrasted individual respondents' qualitative remarks (e.g. answers to open questions) with their Likert scale statements, with the aim of providing a more encompassing picture of respondents' experiences of competition. This type of analysis is particularly appropriate for this type of research where quantitative data is aimed at illuminating the qualitative data; the full range of Likert scale data is displayed through graphs (see Appendices F, G, H).

The qualitative data analysis process within this research was driven by the principle of avoiding 'a generic form of analysis' that often pertains to qualitative reports (Creswell, 2009, p. 184). As contended by Williamon et al. (2021), qualitative analysis is inherently interpretative, for it requires researchers to draw meanings from data and, in doing so, 'a systematic and thorough process' (p. 232) must be followed. Therefore, qualitative data in this research were analysed through thematic analysis, following the principles set out in Braun and Clarke (2006): immersion in the data set, generation of the first codes, theme identification and subsequent review and naming, and report writing. This process was particularly functional to provide 'a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). However, far from being linear, this iterative process required me to step back from the data on several occasions and recode parts of the data: this further step enables researchers to find unexpected, unusual and surprising codes (Creswell, 2009) that could not be anticipated. Figure 4.1 illustrates graphically the data analysis process.



*Figure 4.1: The data analysis of qualitative findings*

The identification of the themes was guided by the flexibility advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006) as the numerical prevalence of themes was not automatically considered a determinant of their importance. Yet, in this research I recognised the implicit quantitative component embedded and deployed in my use of terms like ‘rare’, ‘some’, ‘several’ or ‘many’ to describe qualitative data, which equates to operating some level of quasi-statistical analysis (Maxwell, 2009), intended as indicative of the results that can be derived by qualitative analysis (e.g. how many people claimed a particular assertion). In summary, the active role of the researcher in delineating themes has been acknowledged; nonetheless, when necessary the justification of a conclusion drawn from specific themes was further assisted by numerical evidence, as such numbers supported not only the amount of evidence within data but also discrepancies and opposite views that led to that conclusion. As recommended by Yin (2016), quotations have been included to provide evidence, illustrate and support the data analysis.

The approach to qualitative analysis must be oriented by the research aim (Flick, 2020) which, in this case, was exploratory. Consequently, the data analysis was not driven by a pre-existing coding frame nor aimed at developing a theory as is the case in grounded theory research (Cohen et al., 2018). Thus, the approach to data analysis was inductive and data-driven rather than researcher-driven. While Braun and Clarke’s remark that “‘pure’ induction [is] impossible’ (2022, p. 8) is perfectly

reasonable, as the researcher's subjective assumptions, beliefs, experiences are necessarily brought into the data coding process, in this research the data analysis included removing the questions asked of participants from the documents used for coding, to ensure alignment with a more inductive-oriented approach.

## **4.5 Ethical considerations**

A consideration of the costs and benefits of this research (Cohen et al., 2018) has informed a scrupulous approach to ethical aspects throughout the whole research process. In particular, the steps taken at every stage of the research comply with the four principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice as expressed by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021): respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. All participants were informed of the risks and benefits of taking part in this research; they were granted the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time of the stage and for those who took part in the interview study to review their transcripts; all the questions asked were informed by the principle of 'ensur[ing] that unfair burdens are not placed on particular groups of people' (Williamon et al., 2021, p. 67).

### *4.5.1 Respect*

The principle of respect requires researchers to pay attention to aspects related to privacy, confidentiality, emotional aspects connected to the research, consent, and issues of power (BPS, 2021). During the research design, the University of York Ethics Committee exerted an important regulatory function; obtaining the ethical approval for this research was not straightforward as several issues were entangled within this topic. In particular, as this research may have raised issues relating to student mental health, some risks were identified in relation to conducting potentially difficult interviews with vulnerable groups (Williamon et al., 2021). To reduce the risk of causing distress to participants, I was granted approval to administer a questionnaire to students and to conduct interviews with staff and teachers (section 4.3.2).

Specific ethical concerns for insider researchers relate to anonymity (Fleming, 2018). This issue was particularly relevant in this case as the research was conducted in the institution that I belong to. Granting anonymity through the questionnaires was



quite straightforward; indeed, the survey platform utilised (Qualtrics) automatically anonymised responses from respondents. On the other hand, the anonymisation of the interviews was more complex as in some cases there was potential for identification through participants' revealing their position within the department and references to autobiographical experiences. Therefore, participants were made aware of such risk and no pressure was exerted for them to give consent for their data to be used. As mentioned above, another tool that was used to minimise the potential for identification was to give interviewees the opportunity to examine their interview transcript. This gave them the chance to make changes, edit, delete parts of the interview they were not happy with and check for possible anonymity concerns.

All participants were given an information sheet with relevant information about the research project aims, data collection and management, anonymity-related aspects and participants' rights and it was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary; this was an essential step to achieve a good ethical standard as participants must have freedom of choice in determining their participation within research studies (Arifin, 2018). To minimise the risk of students experiencing psychological difficulties during the questionnaire completion, the information sheet provided to students also included details of some sources of support, should participants need it. Participants were also granted the right to withdraw from the research at any time before, during and after the data collection. Prior to the interview, participants were required to sign a consent form that they could revoke at any time of the research. Finally, I phrased and checked my questionnaire and interview questions carefully to avoid causing any harm or psychological difficulty. Being aware of the sensitivity of the research topic, I set boundaries to the questions on mental health to obtain only the information I needed to answer my research questions, and where this topic came up in interviews, I was careful to follow the lead of interviewees and not push for personal details.

#### *4.5.2 Competence*

The acknowledgement of the areas that are outside one's skills, areas and knowledge are essential to guarantee a high degree of competence (BPS, 2021). In light of the potential sensitivity of the research topic, competence was achieved by avoiding offering participants any professional support outside my area of competence.

However, to minimise the risk of students experiencing psychological difficulties during

the questionnaire completion, the information sheet (Appendix B) also included details of some sources of support, should participants need it. Moreover, to ensure a high ethical standard, I guaranteed participants my availability to discuss any concerns and to provide any further information on the research that they might need.

#### *4.5.3 Responsibility*

As an essential element of autonomy, researchers' responsibility pertains to professional accountability, use of knowledge and skills and respect for other individuals and for the living world as well as for potentially competing duties (BPS, 2021). While not all of these aspects are relevant for this research and others have been already discussed in 5.3.1 and 5.3.2 (e.g. respect for other individuals, use of knowledge and skills), responsibility has been primarily achieved through a careful management of data. All the data has been carefully treated following the guidelines of the General Data Protection Regulations (General Data Protection Regulations, 2018) and stored in a password protected University Cloud which was only accessible to me. Data management and sharing has been observed in strict compliance with the information provided to participants; for example, participants were informed that data may have been shared with my supervisor or internal examiner for research purposes.

#### *4.5.4 Integrity*

The integrity of research relates to honest conduct, accurate representation of findings, fairness, avoidance of exploitation, maintenance of professional boundaries and addressing misconduct (BPS, 2021). One major aspect that relates to integrity is the use of deception (Robson & McCartan, 2016); not deceiving participants was a core principle that guided this research. All the information provided by participants through consent form and my verbal responses at the beginning of interviews were an accurate representation of the research process. The maintenance of professional boundaries was not an issue in relation to interviews as the relationship I had with all my interviewees was fundamentally professional and, therefore, there was no need to negotiate potentially problematic situations, though, as mentioned in Chapter 3, section 3.8.2, hierarchical positions were considered. With regard to the

questionnaires, the maintenance of boundaries was facilitated by the sample of participants; indeed, the anonymity of the online questionnaires and remote administration prevented the occurrence of conflicting relationships with other students.

A second level of integrity pertains to the accurate representation of findings: engagement with iterative coding processes (see section 4.4) was aimed at achieving this. An ongoing process of data review, reflexivity and comparison was aimed at providing an honest, truthful representation of the findings. The use of quotations taken from participants as illustrations of 'the analytic point the research makes about data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 25) combined with some numerical evidence when needed supported accuracy within representation of the findings.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the methods of data collection; in particular, I have explained the rationale for each method by describing its advantages and disadvantages and connected it to relevant ethical aspects. A detailed account of the design process and the data collection process has been provided and particular attention has been given to the description of the data analysis process in connection with existing literature. Lastly, ethical aspects concerning this research have been coherently addressed.

# **Chapter 5: BA Music students' perspectives on competition within the UoY Music Department**

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the multiple perceptions of competition held by some BA (undergraduate) Music students enrolled on two programmes within the BA (Hons) Music at the University of York. These are discussed below in relation to six major themes: students' understanding of and relationship with competition; competitiveness within the department; students' relationships with peers; effects of competition on students' mental health; students' perceptions of institutional and departmental support; competition and future career aims.

Data were gathered through a questionnaire distributed to all 203 BA Music students. The response rate was low as only 38 students (19%) completed and returned the questionnaire; beyond Covid-19 related circumstances (detailed in Chapter 4, section 4.2.3) other factors might have contributed to this outcome. The length of the questionnaire might have discouraged students from completion; efforts were made to avoid unnecessary or repetitive questions, including requesting feedback on the questionnaire length during the pilot test, but the completion of the questionnaire, as disclosed by students who did the pilot, still required 20-25 minutes. Furthermore, despite being a research student in this department, my relationship with undergraduate students is limited. Both in my departmental employment as an office assistant working on the Music Department reception desk one day a week and in my private social life, I am primarily in contact with other postgraduate students; therefore, undergraduate students might not have been invested to complete the questionnaire through the motivation of a personal relationship with me or through the knowledge of the importance of this project to me.

## 5.2 Procedure

At the first stage of the data collection, four undergraduate students from the Music Department at the University of York were invited to take part in a pilot test of the questionnaire. Two of them were enrolled on the BA (Hons) Music, and two on the BA (Hons) Music and Sound Recording (MASR) programme. In addition to completing the questionnaire, students were asked to provide feedback on the questionnaire design; the questionnaire was revised accordingly and distributed in April 2020 through the online platform Qualtrics to all 203 students enrolled in both undergraduate courses offered by the Music Department, University of York (UoY). The questionnaire was administered in the second week of the summer term, after students had already submitted most of their end-of-spring-term assessed work. Two reminders, spaced within a week, were emailed to students by a departmental administrator.

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, multiple choice questions and three 7-point Likert scales to assess respondents' agreement with statements, with options to answer ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (7). As noted in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.3), data from the Likert scale used in this questionnaire was intended to illuminate the qualitative findings and not for statistical purposes. For this reason, all respondents' entries for each Likert scale item are presented in Appendix G<sup>19</sup>, which allowed the researcher to compare and contrast individual Likert scale responses with qualitative remarks made by respondents; of particular interest for the purpose of this research are the responses that do not lean centrally within the Likert scale (Likert scale ratings=1; 2; 3; 5; 6; 7). Procedures concerning data analysis, anonymity and ethics are detailed in the second chapter of the methodology (Chapter 4). The link to the data set is available in Appendix D.

## 5.3 Respondents' demographics

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 38 students. Figure 5.1 provides a graphical representation of respondents' demographic data.

---

<sup>19</sup> Due to word count limitations and practical considerations, respondents' answers to each statement have not been included as part of the chapter. For this reason, they have been presented in Appendix G.

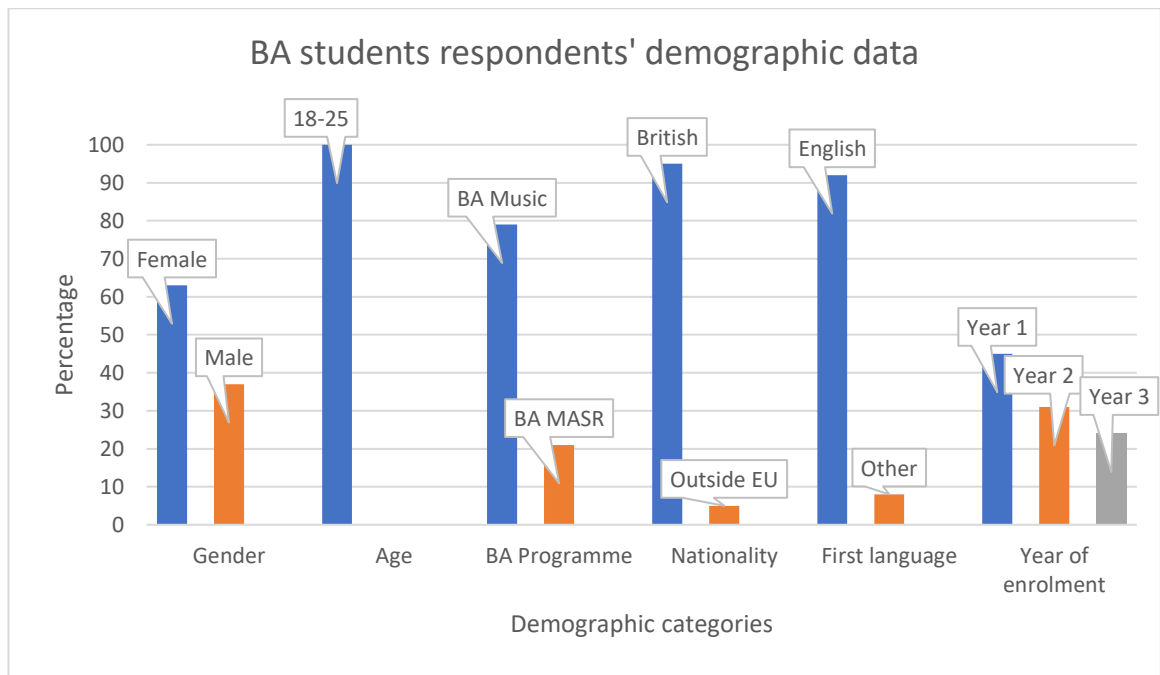


Figure 5.1: BA respondents' demographic data

30 students were enrolled on the BA (Hons) Music (79%) and eight on the BA MASR programme (21%). Some of them completed the questionnaire only partially but provided some useful insights; thus, their responses have been analysed and included in the data set. All 38 respondents were aged between 18 and 25; 24 identified themselves as female (63%) and 14 as male (37%). 36 respondents were British (95%), and two were international students (5%). English was the first language of 35 respondents (92%) while the remaining three were not English native (8%). Most students (n=17) were in Year 1 (45%), 12 in Year 2 (31%) and nine in Year 3 (24%). Where the responses discussed below are across the entire data set, 'BA students' will be used; where responses are from students on individual programmes, the specific programme names will be given.

## 5.4 BA students' general understandings and individual attitude to competition

Within their qualitative responses, respondents detailed their general understanding of competition. Most respondents (n=30) viewed rivalry between people as the prevalent aspect of competition; P31\_MASR, for example, defined competition as 'the rivalry between people of the same field trying to achieve better than one another', while P35\_BA used the winner/loser dichotomy to characterise competition more

systematically: '[competition is] being set against other in an endeavour – with a winner and a loser'. In contrast, three students believed competition to be either externally or internally driven: '[competition is] challenging others or yourself to reach a goal first or to [reach] a better standard' (P29\_BA).

Several respondents detailed further understandings of competition. Seven students mentioned external reward intended as a prize or an award as an integral part of competition; one of them regarded competition as 'an act of competing or working against others for some form of prize, reward or opportunity' (P8\_BA). This conceptualisation seems to imply that competition is correlated to external judgement, provided by a panel that determines the standard to achieve, as suggested by P3\_BA. Another popular opinion was that competition is essentially twofold; seven students defined it as either healthy or unhealthy, mainly depending on individuals' emotional responses to competitive situations:

I feel like there's an unhealthy and healthy side to competition. Some competition is needed to push people to do well [...]. However, when there's a lot of anxiety attached or people need help and support it could affect mental health negatively. (P38\_MASR)

A few students believed that success may delineate a hierarchy between competitors; one of them identified competition as 'something which encourages comparison to others, and in that comparison creates a hierarchy of attainment' (P4\_BA). This hierarchy might result from the 'numerically limited' chances of success (P13\_BA) embedded within competitive situations, either professionally or as students, which was explicitly acknowledged by 12 respondents.

In terms of their individual attitude to competition, 13 respondents reported having a self-focussed attitude in competitive situations, resulting in 'a general devaluing of the importance of being better than others' (P26\_BA). Some respondents (n=7) regarded competition as a driver for their own motivation: striving for excellence, enhancing their performance abilities and becoming more skilled than someone else were all regarded as important features of competition; this driver could connect personally to act as something that 'helps me continue to try and up my abilities as a performer' (P2\_BA).

Respondents' personal attitudes towards competition were investigated through a 7-point Likert scale inviting responses to nine statements (presented in Table 5.2). Table 5.1 shows the correspondence between Likert scale items and rating, which applies to all the Likert scales used within this research.

*Table 5.1: Likert Scale rating*

<b>Likert Scale Item</b>	<b>Likert Scale Rating</b>
Strongly disagree	1
Disagree	2
Somewhat disagree	3
Neither agree nor disagree	4
Somewhat agree	5
Agree	6
Strongly agree	7

Some of these statements (statements 1, 4, 5, 6, 8) were derived from the Revised Competitiveness Index (RCI), as a validated measurement tool to evaluate respondents' enjoyment of competition (Houston et al., 2002). The other statements (statements 2, 3, 7, 9) have been created to gather data in relation to students' response to competitive situations that the RCI did not display. All 38 respondents completed this Likert scale and a graphical representation of students' responses to each statement is provided in Appendix G.

*Table 5.2: Likert scale statements investigating BA Music and MASR students' attitudes towards competition*

<b>Statement number</b>	<b>Item</b>
1	'I often try to outperform other people'
2	'I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition'
3	'I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations'
4	'I regard myself as a competitive person'
5	'I try to avoid competing with others'
6	'I don't like competing against other people'
7	'I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense'
8	'I find competitive situations unpleasant'
9	'I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me'



Respondents' answers to the Likert scale statements seemed to indicate that a high number of students had a comparative/competitive attitude; indeed, 33 of them answered 'strongly agree', 'agree' or 'somewhat agree' to statement 9 while 23 respondents selected these options in relation to statement 4. Nonetheless, 26 students reported feeling stressed in competitive situations and an equal number (n=26) agreed, at least to some extent, with statement 8 ('I find competitive situations unpleasant'). Similarly, 26 respondents claimed not to enjoy competition by answering 'strongly agree', 'agree' or 'somewhat agree' to statement 6, while these options were selected by 18 respondents in relation to statement 2 ('I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition'). Remarks made by respondents shed further light on their Likert scale responses; for example, P27\_BA, who answered 'strongly agree' to statements 5, 7, 8 reported above in Table 5.2<sup>20</sup>, described competition as 'a self-serving way of operating to the potential detriment of others'. Similarly, P2\_BA's Likert scale answers, which seemed to suggest a competitive attitude<sup>21</sup> corroborated their definition of competition as 'part of what drives me as a musician, and helps me continue to try and up my abilities'.

#### *5.4.1 Discussion: BA students' conceptualisation of competition*

Findings suggest that while there was no univocal understanding, feelings of competition among most respondents appeared higher in relation to other people rather than in relation to oneself, as seen from the qualitative data presented above. The prevalence of an external form of competition resonates with the concept of *achievement goal theory* as expressed by Nicholls (1984): in competitive situations, people's judgement of their own abilities is likely to be related to the abilities of the other members of 'a normative reference group' (p. 329). Moreover, people whose self-judgement is strictly intertwined with the judgement of others' abilities display an ego-oriented attitude that is different from that of task-oriented individuals, who

---

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix G for the full range of individual respondents' answers to the Likert scale statements reported in Table 5.2.

<sup>21</sup> As shown in Appendix G, P2\_BA answered 'agree' (Likert scale rating = 6) to the statements 'I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations'; 'I regard myself as a competitive person'; 'I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me'. In addition, they answered 'somewhat disagree' (Likert scale rating = 3) to the statements 'I don't like competing against other people'; 'I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense'; 'I find competitive situations unpleasant'.

conceive their abilities as related to their own perceived mastery of a task. Findings from the questionnaire are consistent with Nicholls (1984), for most students' responses imply an externally-oriented perception of competition, which is linked with a concept of success as a demonstration of superior abilities (Smith, Balaguer et al., 2006). The difference between respondents with a self-directed understanding of competition and those with an external conception is noteworthy: while the first group, which was smaller in size, mentioned a desire to better oneself as the main goal of competition, the second one deemed demonstration of excellence, highest standard and outperforming others as the main purpose of competing. Their articulation of competition, therefore, is then fundamentally different.

Interestingly, some respondents regarded competition as potentially healthy or unhealthy, whose effect on individuals may depend on many factors including individual attitudes, specific contexts in which competition takes place and, potentially, what is at stake. The hierarchical element identified by a few students might add further complexity; in this view, competition is aimed at ordering respondents on the basis of their performance, frequently in conjunction with a specific reward. Students' emphasis on external reward as the main incentive to competition is of interest in light of existing research outlining that extrinsic motivation is not as effective as the intrinsic motivation to enhance students' perseverance and achievement goals (Ormrod, 2004; Schatt, 2011); therefore, these findings may suggest that hierarchical ordering and external rewards contribute to shape a prize-oriented perspective rather than a task-oriented one.

#### *5.4.2 Discussion: BA students' attitudes towards competition*

Findings from the questionnaire highlighted a number of varied responses in relation to students' individual attitude towards competition. Some interesting aspects emerged from the Likert scale responses; the high number of students who agreed with statement 9 (n=33) seems to indicate that most respondents had a comparative attitude. However, most students appeared not to enjoy competition, as substantiated by the attitude towards competition reported by those students showing some degree of agreement with statements 7, 'I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense' and 8 'I find competitive situations unpleasant'. These responses are not necessarily contradictory; given the multifaceted nature of

competition as well as the complexities that pertain to a university music department, it might be speculated that students operate in an environment that facilitates comparison with others (e.g. through close contacts with peers, assessments, auditions offering selective opportunities) but this did not always translate into enjoying taking part in competitive situations. Such lack of enjoyment in competing could account for students' negative response to competition viewed as a threatening comparison, a concept proposed by Johnson (2012). Johnson proposed that specific individual and situational factors could make comparison threatening for one's self-evaluation: when the target is unattainable, when the comparison happens in a domain that is highly valued by those who compare, and when there is a degree of similarity between people. This concept was substantiated by previous and later literature on social comparison (Garcia et al., 2013; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Muller & Fayant, 2010). Therefore, respondents' negative feelings concerning competitive behaviours connected to comparison may be linked to and/or prompted by all or some of the above-mentioned situational factors. As such, there might be potential for discussion within institutions about these conditions, promoting environments that decrease the potential for the development of negative responses to competition among students.

The number of respondents (n=18) who showed some degree of agreement with the tendency to avoid competitive career opportunities (statement 2) indicates that feelings of competition might have a negative impact on students' expectations of their future professional life. Further details of the relationship between students' perceptions of competition and their professional choices will be given in section 5.9. Conversely, the high number of respondents that agreed to various extents with statement 9 (n=33) in relation to comparative behaviours with their peers is particularly interesting; as proposed by Garcia et al. (2013), it seems that the degree of closeness to a target of people who display similar characteristics – in this case, other students who attend the same programme, of the same age group, with similar academic/performance goals – facilitates comparison.

## 5.5 BA students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of competitiveness they experienced in the UoY Music Department through a multiple choice question with answers ranging from *'Not competitive at all'* to *'Highly competitive'*. While there was a prevalence of respondents classifying the atmosphere of the department as *'Moderately competitive'* (n=15), five respondents reported a high level of competition; ten a low one (*'Not very competitive'*); four were unsure; three regarded the department as *'Not competitive at all'* and one preferred not to answer.

Students' opinions regarding the competitiveness of the department were deepened throughout the questionnaire. Almost two thirds of them (n=24) reported some degree of change in relation to their perception of competition throughout their degree, while others did not notice any change (n=10). Among those who reported some degree of changes, no specific differentiation could be observed across the responses of all year groups, even though Year 3 students' responses tended to be more detailed compared to those of Year 1 and Year 2 students. Three respondents felt an increase in their feelings of competition, often linked to relationships: *'The image of competition that I feel has developed within the music department is often exacerbated by people within the department, and is likely not intended to be unhealthy, but can often become unhealthy and deter others'* (P4\_BA). Conversely, five others felt that they gradually became less competitive individuals. In this regard, P27\_BA claimed: *'I initially felt like everyone was really competitive when I started, like there was a desire to show one's achievements and validity [...]. However, [...] the sense of competitiveness subsided once people knew each other better'*. Interestingly, three students reported being aware of their strengths and weaknesses and, consequently, did not engage in competitive situations that they deemed to be beyond their capabilities, leading to a foregone conclusion that they would not achieve a specific outcome: *'I would be less likely to audition for orchestras because I feel there are better flautists out there'* (P29\_BA). Several respondents indicated an enhanced personal awareness towards competition as their course progressed, articulated either as greater understanding of multiple competitive dynamics (n=5) or ability to cope with competition (n=3), as expressed by P3\_BA who reported having *'a better*

understanding of how MPA [Music Performance Anxiety] and perfectionism affect me'. Conversely, a few students reported being negatively affected by the perceived competition in the department (n=4) or struggling with shifting their motivations from being competition-oriented to skills enhancement-oriented (n=1): 'I have tried in this last year in particular to change my motivations for performing from "performance goals" to "mastery goals" [...] but I have found it very difficult to change' (P5\_BA).

Through open-ended questions, respondents further detailed their experiences of competition in connection to departmental opportunities. In particular, they reported sharp feelings of competitiveness within performance activities including end-of-year performances (n=2), concerto audition (n=5), and ensemble auditions (n=9), particularly when the availability of places is low, as in auditions. Interestingly, some respondents believed that students' individual specialisations (e.g. as singers/pianists) may influence their inclination to compete; P6\_BA believed this attitude to be connected with the high number of direct competitors: 'I think some ensembles would [foster competition] if you particularly cared about the ensembles you wanted to enter – especially vocalists [...] as there are so many in the department'. Conversely, two students believed that the wide range of opportunities within the department (e.g. multiple ensembles) prevented students from being competitive: 'I think there are enough [opportunities] that there is not much competition' (P29\_BA). Interestingly, a few respondents regarded BA Music students as more inclined to compete as compared to MASR students, and noted that 'MASR does feel less prestigious and more neglected as a subject' (P31\_MASR), to the point that 'when taking joint modules or interacting with Music students I sometimes feel as though I need to justify my musical knowledge' (P37\_MASR). Moreover, three responses highlighted potential feelings of competitiveness between undergraduates and postgraduates in the form of a presumed higher experience of the latter which might enable them to achieve greater success within the department; for example, P8\_BA claimed: 'Some may say there is competition between BA students and Postgraduate students because they are often more skilled/experienced but still going for the same ensembles/competitions as the BA students'.

While there seemed to be a general agreement between respondents towards the competitiveness of performance opportunities such as auditions, responses were quite diversified in relation to the impact of social media on students' feelings of

competition; indeed, 12 respondents believed that social media actively encouraged them to compare with their peers, seven of them reported not having been affected but did not provide further details and two respondents had mixed views about it. Interestingly, one student who reported mixed feelings about social media believed this resulted from two potentially conflictual feelings: ‘When colleagues post about the opportunities they have secured I feel proud of and happy for them, but also question if that is something I should have worked harder for or even applied to in the first place’ (P13\_BA).

Through a 7-point Likert scale, students were asked to express their agreement or disagreement towards a set of conditions that could potentially increase their feelings of competitiveness in relation to departmental activities and assessments. Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement to eight statements paired with the sentence ‘In the context of my programme of study, my feelings of competition increase when...’. The eight statements are presented below in Table 5.3. 35 respondents completed this Likert scale; among them, six were MASR students and 29 were BA Music students. In order to ask degree-relevant questions, statements 1 and 4 were only displayed to MASR students; statements 2 and 6 were only displayed to BA Music students. Findings are shown in Table 5.3 and a graphical representation of students’ responses to each statement is provided in Appendix G.

*Table 5.3: Likert scale statements investigating BA Music and MASR students’ perceptions of competition towards departmental activities and assessments*

Statement number	Item
1	An activity is music-based rather than sound recording-based
2	An activity is academic-based rather than performance-based
3	An assessment is worth a large number of credits
4	An activity is sound-recording based rather than music-based
5	I am taking part in a project/module of my choice
6	An activity is performance-based rather than academic based
7	My emotional investment in an activity is substantial
8	I feel an activity is linked to my career-related goals

Answers to the statements above indicated that the emotional investment as well as the extent to which an activity connects to one’s career aspirations enhanced feelings of competition among most respondents; indeed, as shown in Appendix G, none of

them disagreed with statements 7 and 8, while 31 respondents answered 'strongly agree', 'agree' or 'somewhat agree' to statement 8 and 34 selected these options in relation to statement 7. Furthermore, sound-recording activities and performance activities were perceived as particularly competitive, respectively, by BA MASR and BA Music respondents: four BA MASR respondents agreed at least to some extent with statement 4 while only one of them agreed with statement 1 and, similarly, 24 BA Music respondents agreed with statement 6 while only six agreed with statement 2.

More specific open-ended questions were asked with regard to perceptions of competition within departmental activities and assessments, and students' answers were consistent with the findings above indicating performance activities as more competitive than academic ones; indeed, 20 respondents regarded performance assessments as fostering more competition than academic ones, viewing these as particularly visible and 'more important to me' (P29\_BA). The impact of performance on students' perceptions of competition was, for example, outlined by P10\_BA who strongly agreed (Likert scale rating = 7) with the statement 'In the context of my programme of study, my feelings of competition increase when an activity is performance-based rather than academic-based' (see Appendix G) and then added: 'I want to be a performer, so it is very painful when I fail slightly or see someone do better than me'. Furthermore, a few respondents mentioned composition assignments or presentations as competitive. Presentations, in particular, were considered similar to performance assignments as they both represent 'a public display of something' (P26\_BA) where students' performances are clearly visible to both staff and peers. Interestingly, several respondents had conflicting views in relation to institutional policies aimed at enhancing the transparency of the marking process: while five of them believed that anonymous marking contributed to decrease perceptions of competition, some others (n=6) thought that anonymity was not completely ensured: 'Assessments are not anonymous because the marker knows your essay topic through supervisions and drafts' (P12\_BA).

Students provided further details regarding mark sharing; due to the connection with peer relationships, these findings will be discussed in section 5.6. The findings above will now be discussed in relation to respondents' general perception of competition within the department, specific opportunities and assessments, performance and sound recording activities.

### *5.5.1 Discussion: General perception of competition within the UoY Music Department*

Responses indicated a prevalence of the view that there was a moderate level of competition within the UoY Music Department; some degree of competition was acknowledged by students but the majority of this sample did not consider it as exceptionally present, as most students regarded the department as a moderately competitive environment. This view might be explained by presuming different attitudes and levels of involvement within the department among respondents, as students have agency to decide the extent to which they want to be involved in non-compulsory activities such as auditions for student-led groups and concerto opportunities, masterclasses, and other performances. Therefore, assuming that most people are not willing to put themselves into extremely uncomfortable situations, the prevalent moderate perception of competition among respondents might be aligned with the flexible structure offered within the two undergraduate degree courses. Furthermore, students can choose many of the projects they want to take, and the structuring of these projects across year groups means that they generally work with different peers throughout the academic year. It may be the case that an educational system that encourages students' close contact effectively contributes to reduce feelings of competition among them; indeed, in light of the maximum number of 25 students allowed on each undergraduate option project, the sense of community may have promoted an inclusive and collaborative atmosphere that some students perceive as in contrast with competition, as suggested by previous studies (Hendricks et al., 2016).

Interestingly, several respondents reported a change in their perspective towards competition since they started studying in this department. These changes were regarded positively by some students in that they increased both their awareness of competition and their ability to respond. Peer relationships seemed to play a part in it, as some students connected such change of perspective with an increased familiarity with their peers. On the other hand, despite being the minority, three respondents experienced an increase within their feelings of competition and mainly linked it with personal relationships. Such perceptions might account for particularly



negative reactions to peer comparisons. While it is likely that subjective, uncontrolled factors play a role in these negative experiences as well as in how peer relationships unfold, there is potential within institutions for further investigation of the context in which these experiences take place.

Different feelings of competition were observed between MASR and BA Music students. In particular, some MASR students' feelings appear to indicate a perception of hierarchy between the two programmes in favour of BA Music students. In light of existing literature identifying sound recording activities as an opportunity for students whose musical interests lie outside a traditional conceptualisation of music education as based on performance (Clauhs et al., 2019), further considerations may be addressed. In particular, it may be relevant to investigate whether MASR students' perceptions mirror independent group views (e.g. through informal conversations that take place outside the department) or, alternatively, whether they perceive this hierarchical structure to be indirectly endorsed by the department; for example, in relation to the distribution and relative proportion of physical spaces for specific activities within the department (e.g. the Music Research Centre being physically separated from the other spaces within the department<sup>22</sup>) or the staff's attitude and interest towards sound recording activities as compared to others. Finally, potential feelings of competitiveness towards BA Music and postgraduate students were identified in the supposed higher skills and abilities mastered by postgraduate students. However, respondents did not provide examples of directly experiencing such higher mastery.

### *5.5.2 Discussion: Perception of opportunities within the UoY Music Department*

The performance opportunities provided by the department seemed to have a relevant impact on many students' feelings of competition, particularly concerning auditions. The reported competitiveness of auditions resonates with findings of previous studies suggesting that music students exhibit a different attitude towards

---

<sup>22</sup> As explained in Chapter 3, (section 3.6.3) the Music Research Centre is a departmental space mainly devoted to sound recording activities. Due to the specific requirements related to recording in a quiet environment, this space is an adjoining building and appears as physically distant from the other departmental spaces.

competitive versus non-competitive performances (Sheldon, 1994). Even though Sheldon's research (1994) was conducted among a sample of high school music students, findings from the present research show that a similar attitude towards competitive situations is displayed by these respondents; indeed, it is interesting to note that fewer students reported feeling competitive in relation to less explicitly competitive performances such as end-of-year performances. The limited visibility of recitals – apart from Year 3 recitals that are public – was also likely to contribute to the limited sense of competition attached to these performances. While the results of auditions will be apparent to all students through public performances, either as members of auditioned ensembles or as concerto performers, the end-of-year performances are not public and the final grade resulting from the performance will be only known by the individual student.

The limited chances of success in relation to auditions were regarded by several respondents as prompting a high level of competition. This is particularly true for the concerto audition – which, for example, P35\_BA regarded as highly competitive – as well as for auditioning ensembles with limited availability of places. In this regard, P29\_BA's disclosure to be unlikely to audition for orchestras due to their self-perception as less proficient on their instrument than their peers is interesting: choosing not to take part in this audition means they were not visible to the conductor and missed out on an opportunity to receive feedback. Furthermore, they assumed that other people would indeed audition when it might be the case that they cannot (e.g. due to illness or other commitments) or decide not to. Nonetheless, the level of competitiveness observed by some respondents in relation to auditions evidenced the potential impact of these opportunities on a range of students: those whose audition is unsuccessful, those who might not take part because they do not feel as proficient as their peers, those who are not interested in auditions but may be part of a peer group in which others do take auditions, and those who are interested but might be discouraged by the competitiveness they observe in other students. Consequently, there is potential for auditions to be regarded as competitive, which explains the particularly high rate of competitiveness linked to auditions by 14 respondents. On the other hand, students have access to a wide range of ensembles, some of which are non-auditioning; this allows students to access music making and performing

opportunities that are not necessarily subject to the intrinsically competitive process of auditioning.

In alignment with existing research outlining both positive and negative effects of social media on people's wellbeing (Akram & Kumar, 2017), students held varied opinions on the effects of social media on their perceptions of competition. Respondents who were negatively affected by social media regarded the comparison with others as the prevalent aspect of those platforms, which resonates with literature highlighting how feelings of social comparison and poorer self-esteem are exacerbated by social media (Vogel et al., 2014). Students' mixed views regarding social media might indicate a conflicted position between competition and peer relationships: while social media might enhance feelings of empathy towards peers' achievements, they could also sharpen that sense of competitiveness embedded in a context such as a higher education music department, where social comparison is often an inevitable part of students' trajectory (Papageorgi et al., 2010; Pecen et al., 2016).

### *5.5.3 Discussion: Perceptions of competition in relation to assessments*

Rather unsurprisingly, assessments seemed to prompt feelings of competition among students. Responses to the Likert scale statements (statements presented in Table 5.3) highlighted that most respondents' feelings of competition were particularly high in relation to assessments connected to their career goals (statement 8); this could indicate that students' aspirations to perform well raise when being assessed on skills and knowledge they deem as relevant for their future. Furthermore, other responses suggested a correlation between the importance attached to specific activities and students' feelings of competition (statement 7). In light of the higher number of BA Music students addressing performance activities as more competitive than academic ones in statement 6 as well as MASR students identifying higher feelings of competition in relation to sound recording activities in statement 4, it could be speculated that students' emotional investment in these activities is particularly high, which may determine higher perceptions of competition. In relation to performance activities, it may also be the case that such heightened perception of competition is underpinned by the limited chances to succeed in specific performance contexts: as explained in the previous section (5.4.2), the limited availability of places in performance contexts such as afforded by successful auditions might make a

difference in these students' perceptions of competition, compared to the unrestricted availability of the highest grades in academic work or in individual performance assessments.

## **5.6 Feelings of competition and relationship with peers**

Peer relationships were a recurrent theme throughout the data set. While it would be unrealistic to give evidence of all the experiences mentioned by students, some responses have been selected as particularly indicative of a shared range of feelings among respondents. Nine students referred to their relationship with peers as something that had an impact on their feelings of competition within the department. P6\_BA, for example, said: 'Personally, I have not made that many friends in the department [...], and I guess that may have increased my competitive nature against them'. Similarly, P5\_BA believed peer relationships to be responsible for an enhanced sense of competition among students in the department:

Relationship with peers is definitely a contributing factor [to feelings of competition] – there are a lot of turbulent relationships in the department with friends falling out, relationships breaking up and friends [running student ensembles] having to reject their friends for musical roles/positions.

Eight responses highlighted the existence of a challenging sense of competition within the narrow group of peers who play the same instrument; for instance, P10\_BA reported that 'when people who play my instrument get a better mark than me in their end of year performance I feel like a total failure'.

Conversely, a number of respondents (n=8) highlighted a generally supportive atmosphere among peers that helped the building of a sense of community and three of them believed that students' different experiences, specialisations and career aims contributed to reduced feelings of competition; P27\_BA, for example, believed that the 'recognition that everyone has their own strengths and experiences' enabled students not to be intensively competitive. In alignment with these views of a supportive peer community, almost two thirds of respondents (n=24) identified peers

as people that they would feel comfortable in talking to about feelings of competition within the department, largely outnumbering all other departmental categories, including academic supervisors, instrumental and vocal teachers, and administrative staff (findings in relation to these categories will be presented in 5.6).

Peer-related feelings of competition among respondents also arose from mark sharing; 20 respondents reported that sharing assessment results with their peers had an impact on their feelings of competition, at least to some extent. As noted above, P10\_BA reported feelings of 'failure' when hearing of other students' marks; several respondents reported that mark sharing led to a direct, numerical comparison with others; this could also be constructive as it 'help[s] gauge how well I have done' (P38\_MASR), while one response was directed towards possible competitors in a future professional capacity: 'it squares me up against who else might take my future career options, as much as I don't like to think that' (P6\_BA). Some students believed that sharing marks may have a positive impact on their own self-confidence and, therefore, regarded mark sharing as a non-competitive activity; in particular, mark sharing allowed four of them to understand that their mark was aligned with those of their peers: P26\_BA, for example, felt that mark sharing 'actually relieved me a bit, because it turned out everyone had performed at a similar level'. Conversely, six students no longer shared their results in order to avoid feeling competitive with their peers.

Unlike marks, most students positioned feedback as a tool for development in the form of 'advice on how to improve' (P20\_BA) rather than something that instils competition. Nonetheless, a few students thought that feedback has the potential to encourage competitive feelings among students, for example as an expression of staff evaluation of students' work, which 'has more weighing than opinions of other students' (P35\_BA).

### *5.6.1 Discussion: BA students' feelings of competition and relationship with peers*

The impact of peer relationships on students' feelings of competition resonated with the general views on competition of the majority of respondents (as discussed above in section 5.3) who identified competition as a rivalry between people rather than a

self-oriented battle (n=30). These findings corroborate sports literature where research about peer relationships is more abundant; several studies outline a strong connection between relationship with peers and development of competitive feelings (Ommundsen et al., 2005; Smith, 2003; Smith, Balaguer et al., 2006). A recurring trend was the relationship between students' different specialisations and competitive feelings. Unsurprisingly, individual specialisations seem to target students' sense of competition towards peers who play the same instrument: the competition that arises in the UoY Music Department for seats within specific ensembles (e.g. the symphony orchestra) is inevitably directed towards peers who are direct competitors for those places. Again, these findings corroborate existing literature (Garcia et al., 2013) as these respondents' feelings of competition seemed to be mainly directed towards those peers with whom they share a degree of similarity through a similar background (e.g. playing the same instrument) and a similar aim (e.g. auditioning for the same ensemble).

With regard to peer relationships, students reported a differentiated range of experiences, from a lack of socialisation (P6\_BA) to strong involvement with peer-related social dynamics (P5\_BA). The differentiated views in terms of peer acceptance and socialisation expressed by respondents have also been observed in sports literature (Smith, Ulrich-French et al., 2006) and account for the strong impact that different types of peer relationships might have on views of competition within a complex, multifaceted environment.

Findings also evidenced that sharing marks and, to a lesser extent, feedback with peers may impact on students' feelings of competition. Feedback sharing was not regarded as a competitive activity by most respondents; nonetheless, a few of them believed that staff's opinions on students' work tends to be perceived by students as more relevant than that of peers. Therefore, in this sense, feedback sharing may reveal staff's thoughts about students' work which could result in some degree of comparison, if not explicit competition. With regards to marks, it is interesting to notice that while mark sharing seemed to instil competitive feelings for 20 respondents, only six of them chose to stop sharing. While auditions may be considered a competitive process per se in light of the limited availability of seats within ensembles and visibility of the outcome during concerts, students have agency to decide whether to share their marks with their peers or not. It may be speculated

that pressure from peers to share their marks in informal conversations may result in most students accepting such pressure and, therefore, only a minority of students keep their marks private. Nonetheless, it should be noted that several respondents regarded mark sharing as a non-competitive activity and felt that they benefitted from it. These respondents, however, reported their marks to be generally in line with those of the majority of their peers, which seems to indicate that the extent to which students consider mark sharing as a competitive activity may depend on their actual marks; indeed, negotiating feelings of competition with mark sharing could be more challenging for students whose marks fall short of their own expectations or whose results could be below the results of their peers.

Lastly, findings concerning respondents' inclinations to share their feelings of competition with peers evidenced the complexity of peer relationships; while students inevitably see their peers as competitors in specific circumstances (e.g. auditions), this seemed to go together with an openness that allowed students to talk with their peers about feelings of competition, perhaps contributing to the de-stigmatisation of competitive behaviours within the department.

## **5.7 Relationship between feelings of competition and mental wellbeing**

Through another 7-point Likert scale, respondents were asked questions about the general perception of their mental health; 30 of them completed this Likert scale. Statements are presented below in Table 5.4. All statements but two (statements 3 and 6) were derived from a large survey distributed to students across multiple UK universities to gain insight into students' mental health status (Pereira et al., 2018). Statements 3 and 6 were included to gather data about potential correlation between respondents' mental health and respondents' degree programme and activities within the department. A graphical representation of students' responses to each statement is provided in Appendix G.

*Table 5.4: Likert scale statements investigating BA Music students' assessment of their own mental health*

<b>Statement number</b>	<b>Item</b>
1	I developed a mental health condition while at university
2	In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition
3	I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well in my academic/sound recording assessments
4	I often feel isolated.
5	I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help
6	I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my instrument/voice
7	I often feel worried or anxious

The answers to the Likert scale statements presented in Table 5.4 suggested that a number of students did not experience a deterioration in their mental health in connection with their higher education studies; indeed, while ten of them answered 'strongly disagree' (Likert scale rating=1) and six 'disagree' (Likert scale rating=2) to statement 1 ('I developed a mental health condition while at university), seven respondents answered either 'agree' or 'somewhat agree' to that statement (Likert scale ratings=6; 5), and none of them strongly agreed. Nonetheless, almost two third of respondents (n=19) regarded their mental health as dependant on their performing abilities by agreeing to various extents with statement 6, whilst the cohort had more divergent opinions on the role of academic/sound-recording assessment: 15 respondents selected either 'strongly agree', 'agree' or 'somewhat agree' and 11 selected 'somewhat disagree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' in response to statement 3 ('I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well in my academic/sound recording assessments'). Lastly, 19 respondents reported feeling often worried or anxious by agreeing to various extents with statement 7.

Further specific open-ended questions were asked to unveil respondents' perceptions of competition in relation to their mental health. Most responses from those students who answered these questions (n=20 out of 26) indicated that students believed that competitive feelings have the potential to impact on their wellbeing. Students' answers suggested a relationship between competitive feelings and their mental wellbeing rather than mental health, as none of their answers implied the



diagnosis of a mental health illness as a result of competitive feelings. Some respondents referred to the detrimental effects of competition on self-esteem, insecurity, or anxiety (n=8) while others acknowledged the positive impact that competition might have on their wellbeing (n=5). For instance, one student stated: 'I find competition to be healthy as it pushes me to do better but I can see how people take it too seriously' (P9\_BA).

14 respondents did not perceive substantial changes in their mental wellbeing in relation to feelings of competition experienced in the department; however, such changes were reported by 13 students. Three of them experienced a boost in their self-confidence and motivation resulting from competitive situations: P13\_BA, for example, described the type of competition experienced as 'informative about my skill set and skill level', which 'has boosted my self-confidence'. Three other students reported a more relaxed attitude compared to the 'pressure to be competitive' experienced at the beginning of their degree (P23\_MASR). Conversely, several students reported a decline in their wellbeing, either resulting from circumstances such as unsuccessful auditions that left them 'feeling anxious about [their] playing' (P3\_BA) or, more generally, from any competitive element within their degree rather than being connected to a specific outcome.

### *5.7.1 Discussion: Relationship between feelings of competition and mental health*

Respondents' answers to the Likert scale statements presented in Table 5.4 showed that several respondents' mental health did not undergo significant negative changes since commencing their degree. Nonetheless, answers to open questions revealed that most respondents regarded competition as something impactful, and it is noteworthy to see that not only negative consequences were raised; indeed, a few students pointed out that they felt at ease in competitive situations within their studies. While detrimental feelings of competition seemed to be rooted in the institutional cultures of some conservatoires (Pecen et al., 2016; Williamon & Thompson, 2006), one comparative study (Papageorgi et al., 2010) suggested that perceptions of competitiveness may be higher in conservatoire settings than in university music departments, as the conservatoire environment is perceived by students as

'competitive and highly demanding' (p. 431). Furthermore, conservatoires' historical emphasis on performance could transform the educational context, making it inherently more focussed towards comparative performance and measurement. Likewise, given that the culture of an institution affects higher education students at many levels (Bliss & Sandiford, 2004; Carey, 2018; Perkins, 2013), the positive responses to competition that emerged from the questionnaire could at least partially be rooted in the learning environment where competitiveness is softened by an institutional culture shaped by aspects such as flexibility of the project system, the wide range of opportunities provided including non-auditioning ensembles, and the staff's attitude.

Another important finding relates to how competition was perceived as detrimental: while for some respondents such negative feelings were strongly related to the outcome of a competition – such as an audition – others did not feel comfortable with the act of competing regardless of the specific circumstance, which led to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. The recognition of such differentiation is potentially crucial; indeed, future institutional policies directed at supporting music students should be informed by an enhanced understanding of the multiple ways in which specific issues – competition in this case – affects students' mental health, in order to provide the best possible support (Haddon, 2019b). Therefore, such understanding could have relevant implications for policy makers, educators and professionals who operate in higher education and whose duty is to provide students with some degree of pastoral support.

## **5.8 Coping strategies and institutional support**

Respondents were asked to provide details of the coping strategies they adopted to deal with competition in the department, if any. Five students handled the emotional demands of competitive situations through avoiding mark sharing, frequent instrumental/vocal practice, hard work, goal setting and avoiding repertoire that they knew other students might also work on. 15 students reported emotion-focussed coping strategies: relaxation techniques, positive self-talk, speaking with professionals, and working on a self-focussed attitude. Two students chose to disengage from competitive situations while a few engaged with a combination of both practical and

emotional strategies: 'Working hard to the best of my abilities. Positive self-talk' (P12\_BA). Six respondents did not use any strategy to deal with the emotional demands of competitiveness; among them, three did not provide further details, two regarded coping strategies as non-essential either because they had 'a drive to compete constantly' (P2\_BA) or because they did not 'feel any emotional demand' (P23\_MASR), and one believed their lack of coping strategy to have 'had an effect on my mental health without me paying attention' (P6\_BA). Lastly, it is relevant to note that some students regarded their coping strategies as being directed towards performance activities due to the high level of visibility these entailed, while only one student referred to both performance and academic activities.

Beyond coping strategies, respondents were asked to share their opinions of the support received within the UoY Music Department to address issues of competition. All but one respondent felt comfortable in talking with someone within the department about their feelings of competition, but there was a high degree of variability among respondents' choices. Peers were mentioned by almost two thirds of respondents (n=24), followed by academic supervisors (n=16) and instrumental and vocal teachers (n=15), other members of the academic staff (n=4), performance supervisors (n=5), members of the administrative staff (n=4). Students then detailed the reasons why they felt comfortable with those specific people. A few recurring themes emerged: closeness, similarity of feelings and experiences and trustworthiness with regard to peers; trustworthiness, role of experience and regular contact in relation to instrumental teachers. Similarly, academic supervisors, performance supervisors and other members of the academic staff were mainly mentioned because of their experience, trustworthiness and willingness to help students. No further explanation was provided by respondents who mentioned members of the administrative staff.

Within the broader university, some respondents felt comfortable in talking to institutional services, but provided limited details regarding the reasons for their choices; in particular, the Open Door service was mentioned by five students, followed by the Careers Service (n=2) – which was defined as 'very helpful and approachable' by P4\_BA, college members (n=2), and other student services (n=1). However, four students would not talk about their feelings of competition with any of these services.

Some questions were designed to explore respondents' views on the kind of further support they thought would be valuable for music students in the department, if any. 20 students expressed a favourable opinion towards the provision of sessions on students' experiences of competition and mental health; three respondents would not regard them as valuable but provided no further explanation, and seven were unsure. In relation to the type of session they would find most useful, student-led sessions (n=10) and workshops (n=10) were mentioned by several students. While student-led sessions were favoured as 'more relatable' (P12\_BA) for students, workshops were believed to be useful as an expression of the 'department's [acknowledgment of] the issue' (P27\_BA), though details of whether these should be staff- or student-led were not always given. Some respondents felt that it might be 'daunting' (P12\_BA) or 'cringey' (P22\_BA) for students to lead these sessions (n=2). Workshops and student-led sessions were followed by modules aimed at addressing issues of competition (n=4). Three respondents would like modules/lectures on competition to be compulsory; one would prefer an elective project. Lastly, two students (P12\_BA and P15\_BA) regarded the professional world as inherently competitive: 'I think that to remove competition would be very difficult and unproductive; the [professional] world is competitive and students must prepare for that' (P15\_BA). Therefore, in opposition with the majority of respondents, they believed that reducing competition in the department may be a disservice to students.

### *5.8.1 Discussion: Use of coping strategies*

These findings highlighted a high degree of variability among students' employment of coping strategies. All three types of strategies addressed by Nicholls and Polman (2007) – problem-focussed, emotion-based and avoidance – were mentioned by respondents. The competitiveness embedded in departmental opportunities, particularly in relation to performance activities (section 5.4), indicates the importance of coping with competitive occurrences, and most students seemed able to respond to such challenges. Nonetheless, six of them did not report making use of any coping strategy. Such circumstances might have been informed by diverse reasons: they might not have been sufficiently equipped; others, instead, may have been used to competition since their pre-university experiences. It might also be the case that some students do not feel they need any coping strategy at all, although in one case the use

of coping strategies seems to have been underestimated by a student, resulting in a negative impact on their wellbeing. The implications of the latter response, in particular, must be carefully considered, as existing literature highlights the existence of a connection between potentially harming behaviours and a lack of effective coping strategies (Corbin et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the high visibility of performance activities was unquestioned by respondents and the correlation between the degree of exposure in performance and the need for coping strategies seemed to be highly recognised, aligning these findings with sports literature (Anshel & Anderson, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Therefore, these findings pose further questions regarding future departmental responses to those challenges experienced by students in relation to performance activities.

### *5.8.2 Discussion: Support within the institution*

All respondents identified at least one group of people within the department with whom they felt comfortable in talking about their feelings of competition. The high degree of variability among students' choices accounted for a broad range of support which fits well with the intertwined social dynamics of a higher education music department. Consistently with previous data (Williamon & Thompson, 2006), respondents indicated peers and instrumental/vocal teachers as particularly important categories as sources of support. The significance of peer relationships – discussed in section 5.5.1 – was confirmed; despite competition being externally driven for most respondents, such feelings were not in conflict with a sense of belonging that has been recognised also by previous literature (Mauder, 2018); this made peers a privileged category to talk to for 24 respondents.

The importance of instrumental/vocal teachers outlined by these respondents resonates with findings among conservatoire students (Williamon & Thompson, 2006). The regular contact hours between students and teachers, indeed, may help to strengthen the student-teacher bond, resulting in a positive attitude from students towards sharing concerns of competition. Furthermore, the supporting role of instrumental and vocal teachers for 15 respondents might relate to the relevance of performance among the respondents: given that competition was often perceived in connection with performance, instrumental/vocal teachers would obviously form a

privileged category for students to discuss their feelings of competition with. Furthermore, 16 students viewed academic staff members as a source of support, which is relevant in light of academic staff's legal duty to provide students with pastoral care in UK universities (Jones-Davies, 2019). Differently from instrumental and vocal teachers, academic supervisors at the University of York are formally required to 'provide general pastoral guidance' (University of York, n.d.) during supervisions; therefore, it is not surprising that these respondents identified them as one of the most relevant sources of support. Additionally, many academic supervisors lead departmental ensembles and some of them lead academic projects on performance; therefore, their role fits closely with performance activities that students engage in within the UoY Music Department.

Students' answers suggested that only a few respondents would feel at ease in sharing their feelings of competition with support services available within the wider institution. One plausible explanation of the difference between respondents' perceptions of departmental and university support could be that the degree of closeness plays a part in communication, and the sense of belonging within the department provided a higher degree of trust within that environment; indeed, these findings indicate that these students tended to look for support primarily within their personal relationships. However, while the department acts as a first point of contact for music students, its staff are not necessarily professionally trained to provide mental health support and specialist services must be able to intervene where professional help is needed.

Findings regarding students' thoughts on further support evidenced that discussions of competition within the department would be highly valued by 20 respondents. Nonetheless, variance among respondents on the compulsoriness of sessions on competition might indicate a different perception of this matter and it is worth observing that two students (P12\_BA and P15\_BA) were not in favour of reducing competition in the department, due to the perceived high competitiveness of musical careers. In this sense, competition in the UoY Music Department may have been considered by these students as valuable in preparation for their professional future.

In relation to the leadership of these sessions, ten respondents felt that student-led sessions could be beneficial, which aligns with most respondents'

perception (n=24) of peers as people they would share their feelings of competition with. On the other hand, they often did not provide further details on what kind of students should lead such sessions; indeed, only one student designated older and more experienced students as the ideal candidates. Considering some respondents' reticence to view student-led sessions as beneficial, this poses practical concerns on how to determine which category of student or staff members might be most apt to facilitate such sessions.

## **5.9 Perceptions of competition in relation to future career aims**

Respondents provided details regarding their perception of competition in relation to their professional career aspirations by answering open-ended questions. 15 respondents thought *competitive* to be an accurate description of their future professional life, while four of them disagreed. Some of those who regarded their future career as competitive described competition as an integral aspect of the music industry, for example by describing 'the world of musical performance' as 'very competitive' (P20\_BA) and 'music as a discipline [as] rather unforgiving when it comes to not quite being good enough at performance or other aspects' (P31\_MASR). Others, instead, believed the degree of competition to be strictly connected with the specialisation: 'Depending on the area of music. Orchestra[s] can be very competitive and more community music places are less so' (P29\_BA). None of the respondents explicitly expressed a sense of excitement in relation to a competitive working context; one of them stated: 'I don't want to have to compete against others just to create what I want [...], but unfortunately I don't think I have a choice' (P6\_BA). Lastly, a few students (n=6) believed that their future careers would not be competitive and the majority of them expressed their aspiration to work in a more supportive environment devoid of competitive elements. P5\_BA's comments, in this regard, are particularly emotive: 'My inability to cope with the competitive environment of performing without it having a bad impact on my mental health has ultimately resulted in me choosing not to pursue a career in performance'. This student also reported heightened feelings of competition in relation to departmental activities connected to their professional aspirations (see Table 5.3, statement 8 'I feel an activity is linked to

my career-related goals' for reference; respondents' answers are reported in Appendix G).

### *5.9.1 Discussion: Competition and career expectations*

While it might have been the case that some students, particularly those who had just started their undergraduate degree, were not yet highly focussed on their future possible careers, these findings reveal awareness among several respondents of the connections between competition and the music industry, whose competitiveness has been evidenced by existing literature (Bartleet et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2017). Consistently with findings from the above-mentioned literature, students who envisaged facing competition in their future professional life seemed to view competition as an inevitable part of their future careers, but some of them were also reluctant to accept it, which seems to indicate an attitude of passive acceptance of the competitive dynamics of the job market they may encounter in the future. While more specific research is needed to investigate undergraduate music students' expectations towards their future careers, it may be the case that this reluctance is also rooted in the perception of the music industry as a challenging environment, not only with regard to competition but also in relation to its negative impact on musicians' wellbeing on multiple levels, as reported by Gross and Musgrave (2016). Taking this into account, it is not surprising that some responses indicated students' desire to work in a supportive environment, rather than a competitive one. In this regard, it may be relevant to discuss further how policies and competition-related issues are addressed within tertiary-level music institutions to prepare students for the type of competitiveness they may face within their career.

## **5.10 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the multiple perceptions of competition among 38 undergraduate BA Music and BA MASR students from one UK music department. 30 respondents displayed a strongly prevalent view of competition as a rivalry between people rather than a self-oriented battle. Such perception resonates with existing literature claiming that a tendency for individual comparison with other people particularly suits competitive situations (Nicholls, 1984) and fits well in the



socially complex context of a higher education music department. The presence of a prize or a tangible reward (e.g. a place in a prestigious auditioned ensemble) was also viewed by several respondents as an aspect that triggered competition; this fits the characteristics of the music department where the questionnaire was administered. Findings showed a general agreement between respondents in relation to the competitiveness of opportunities such as auditions within the UoY Music Department.

The majority of respondents regarded the general atmosphere of the department as moderately competitive and several students experienced some degree of change within their feelings of competition since they started studying in this department. Such moderate perception could be explained by focussing on the flexibility of the undergraduate course: students can decide which opportunities and option projects they want to take, which allows them to be selective about the kind of competitive scenarios they want to enter. Consequently, students with a strong competitive drive are able to undertake the most competitive opportunities while those who do not feel at ease in such competitive scenarios have the chance to take part in less competitive opportunities (e.g. non-auditioned ensembles). On the other hand, such a flexible system does not entirely rule out the chance that non-competitive students might be involved in competitive situations; indeed, it might be the case that these students would like to take part in ensembles but the only one available for their instrument is one that requires audition.

Competition seems to be often viewed by these respondents as relating to performance activities rather than academic ones, and it is heightened by visibility and limited chances of success within specific performance contexts (e.g. auditions). Respondents' views on the impact of social media on perceptions of competition were quite balanced: almost half expressed concerns about this while the remainder did not. Other aspects such as result-sharing were regarded as fostering a high level of competition among some respondents.

A recurrent trend was the impact of peer relationships on respondents' perceptions of competition: as previously outlined by Garcia et al. (2013), the degree of closeness to peers seemed to determine a higher level of perceived competition. However, such competitiveness goes together with a tendency to identify peers as the privileged category with whom to share feelings of competition. These findings

effectively highlight the complexity of those social dynamics that occur in a complex and multifaceted social environment such as a higher education music department.

Almost all respondents acknowledged a correlation between competition and mental health, but while the majority focussed on the negative effects of competition on mental health, some of them described it as motivating and healthy. Nonetheless, while most respondents regarded themselves as competitive individuals, not many enjoyed competition. Such dualism might be explained by identifying competition as a challenge that students experience in various forms within this music department, which may have different implications depending on students' individual attitudes, curricular choices, relationship with peers, with staff members and perception of institutional support. Consequently, there might be potential for institutional discussions about steps that need to be taken to decrease the potential for the development of negative responses to competition.

Respondents' approach to the challenges of competition was softened by a wide use of coping strategies and reliance on departmental support in the form of peer support and pastoral support received within the department from instrumental/vocal teachers, supervisors, and members of the academic and administrative staff. Lastly, given that a number of respondents deemed 'competitive' as a relevant description of their future professional life, future institutional discussions might address the provision of events on competition that could help students to build coping strategies whose relevance and applicability goes beyond their higher music education study pathway.

# **Chapter 6: PhD Music students' perspectives on competition within the UoY Music**

## **Department**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the multiple perceptions of competition among a sample of 15 PhD students enrolled in the Music Department of the University of York, UK. Findings are discussed in relation to five major themes: factors that influence PhD students' perceptions of competition; aspects prompting feelings of competition within the Music Department; aspects softening perceptions of competition within the Music Department; relationship between respondents' perceptions of competition and mental health; relationship between PhD students' perceptions of competition within their research trajectory and their attitude towards the profession.

To achieve a high level of ethical standards, demographic data regarding PhD students' specific type of research – PhD by thesis, by performance, or by composition – was not collected.

The questionnaire was distributed in June 2020 via e-mail invitation to all PhD students enrolled in the Music Department at that time (n=77). Despite regular email reminders, the response rate was low as only 15 students completed and returned the questionnaire (19% of the total number of PhD students). Mindful of the low response rate to the BA students' questionnaire, the length of the questionnaire for PhD students was revised and reduced, but, unfortunately, this measure did not seem to have a substantial impact on the completion rate. Furthermore, as outlined in Chapter 4 (section 4.2.3), the practical barriers arising from the first lockdown resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to have contributed to the low response rate.

### **6.2 Procedure**

This questionnaire was designed shortly after the distribution of the one for BA (Hons) Music students and several changes were made according to the specific characteristics of the research study. Specific questions were asked about feelings of

competition in connection with individual's research area, public events connected to research (e.g. presentations in the department and in national and international conferences), employment as Graduate Teaching Assistants, and engagement with departmental research opportunities.

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, multiple choice questions and two 7-point Likert scales to assess respondents' agreement with statements, with options to answer ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (7). As pointed out in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.3), data from the Likert scale used in this questionnaire was intended to illuminate the qualitative findings and not analysed for statistical purposes. For this reason, all respondents' entries for each Likert scale item are presented in Appendix H, which allowed the researcher to compare and contrast individual Likert scale responses with qualitative remarks made by respondents. All respondents were informed that completion of the questionnaire would be anonymous and their identity would not be revealed to the researcher or made visible within the research output. The link to the data set is available in Appendix D.

### **6.3 Respondents' demographics**

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 15 PhD students. Figure 6.1 provides a graphical representation of respondents' demographic data.

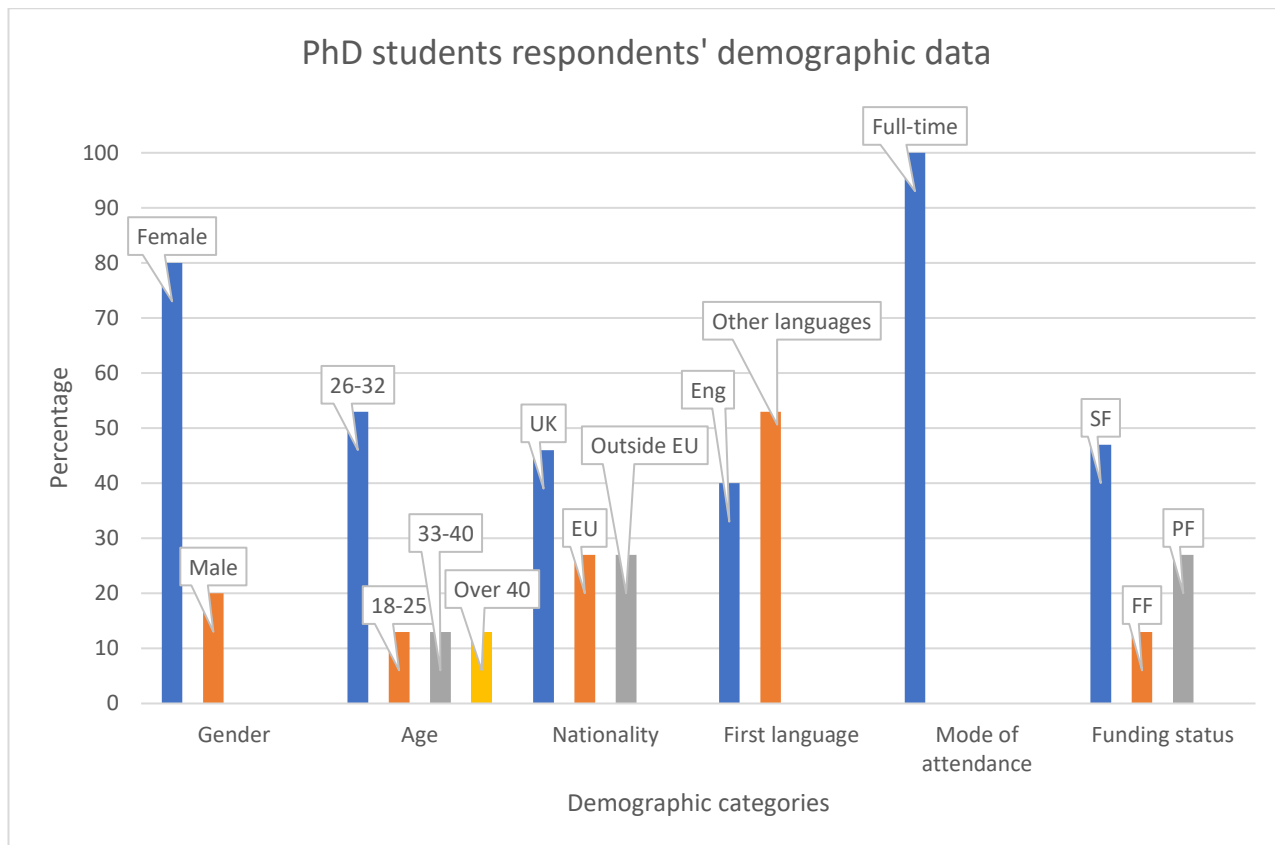


Figure 6.1: PhD respondents' demographic data

The majority of respondents (n=12) identified themselves as female (80%), and three as male (20%). Eight respondents were aged between 26 and 32 (53%), two between 18 and 25 (13%), two between 33 and 40 (13%), two over 40 (13%) and one preferred not to disclose this information. Seven respondents (46%) identified themselves as British, four as international (27%) and four others (27%) as from a country within the European Union; six respondents regarded English as their first language (40%), eight did not (53%) and one respondent did not answer. All respondents were registered as full-time students; seven were self-funded (47%), two fully-funded (13%), four partly funded (27%) and two (13%) preferred not to disclose this information.

## 6.4 Factors influencing PhD students' perceptions of competition

This section presents findings indicating how internal and external factors appear likely to influence PhD students' perceptions of competition. Through open questions, respondents provided rich details regarding their understanding of competition. Among the factors that were likely to influence respondents' perceptions of

competition, individual attitude was acknowledged as a determining factor of individuals' approach to competition by four respondents and was seen as dependent on circumstances such as personal growth rather than as a fixed trait. For example, one respondent stated that their attitude towards competition 'definitely changed', mainly due to age: 'I had a very different perspective when I was 18 compared to now. I could easier be influenced by the competition around me and get stressed whereas through the years I have learned how to control that and sometimes even avoid it because I know its impact on me' (P1\_PhD). Furthermore, five respondents explicitly identified themselves as either non-competitive or self-competitive, and a self-focused attitude was predominant among four others.

Beyond individual attitudes, respondents referred to a number of external factors as influencing their perceptions of competition. In particular, feelings of competition were perceived as context dependent by eight respondents; indeed, competitiveness was described as 'very situational' and competition in a musical context was 'to be expected' (P8\_PhD); several students referred to a variety of past and present situations as contexts for competition, including research conferences and presentations within the UoY Music Department (n=4). Interestingly, several responses across the data set highlighted a widespread perception of competition in the music domain as connected to the context of instrumental/vocal performing. Competition in performance was seen as particularly intense by seven respondents and the majority of these recalled experiences of performance-related competition as stressful or anxiety-triggering:

I took part in many competitions before 18 years old in my hometown and it left me bad memories which made me feel scared of instrumental competitions a little bit. I don't like any forms of competition because it make[s] me feel anxious. (P6\_PhD).

Students' attitudes to competition were further explored through a 7-point Likert scale. Statements are presented below in Table 6.1. As within the survey of undergraduate students, some of these statements (statements 1, 3, 6, 8, 9) were derived from the Revised Competitiveness Index (Houston et al., 2002). The other statements (statements 2, 4, 5, 7) were created to gather data in relation to students'

response to competitive situations that the RCI did not display. All 15 PhD students completed this Likert scale; one respondent did not answer statement 3. Please see Appendix H for the graphical representation of the responses.

*Table 6.1: Likert scale statements investigating PhD Music students' attitudes towards competition*

<b>Statement number</b>	<b>Item</b>
1	'I often try to outperform other people'
2	'I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition'
3	'I regard myself as a competitive person'
4	'I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations'
5	'I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me'
6	'I try to avoid competing with others'
7	'I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense'
8	'I don't like competing against other people'
9	'I find competitive situations unpleasant'

The answers to the Likert scale statements seem to indicate that a moderately competitive attitude was prevalent among respondents. For example, seven of them agreed to various extents with statement 3 (Likert scale ratings=5; 6; 7) while five disagreed (Likert scale ratings=2; 3) and none selected 'strongly disagree' (Likert scale rating=1). Most notably, the majority of respondents did not seem to feel at ease with competitive situations: 13 of them agreed to various extents with statement 8 ('I don't like competing against other people') and 12 with statement 9 ('I find competitive situations unpleasant') and more than two thirds (n=11) reported avoiding competitive situations due to the stress they entail by answering either 'strongly agree', 'agree' or 'somewhat agree' to statement 7. Furthermore, as anticipated above, some of the Likert scale answers further illuminated the qualitative findings<sup>23</sup>; for example, P11\_PhD, who selected 'strongly disagree' to the statement 'I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me' (see

<sup>23</sup> As within the survey for undergraduate students, respondents' answers to the Likert scale could not be included in the main text due to excessive length. The full range of PhD students' responses to the Likert scale statements presented in Tables 6.1 (see above) and 6.2 (p. 140) is available in Appendix H.

Appendix H), described competition as 'largely pointless' and deemed competition directed toward others as 'a waste of time and energy'. Only one respondent identified themselves as having a strong, externally driven competitive attitude: their claim 'I have always wanted to do better than others and excel in what I was doing' (P5\_PhD) through open questions, and their Likert scale answers to statements 1, 3, 5<sup>24</sup> suggested that they regard themselves as a competitive individual. Moreover, such attitude was also shaped by their musical training, and this respondent described their experience using highly emotive language:

My principal instrument teacher encouraged us to participate in music competitions and that seemed the only way to build a career in music, also considering that at the conservatoire there was a strong emphasis on performance. This resulted in a lot of pressure that was unbearable at times: I cried after one of my classmates won a prize (and I didn't) at a music competition [...]. This sense of competition was so embedded in my musical training that my identity as human being was totally overshadowed by my identity as musician.

However, one student deemed the consequences of competition as positive: 'I participated in small-scale instrumental competitions as a teenager [...], and was grateful for the chance to perform new repertoire, and to receive performance feedback' (P7\_PhD). Lastly, all students who reported attending a conservatoire (n=3) as part of their musical training described that environment as particularly competitive: 'I would say that I felt a bigger degree of competition while I was studying in a conservatoire and not that much while I was studying Music at the university' (P1\_PhD).

---

<sup>24</sup> P5\_PhD answered 'strongly agree' (Likert scale rating=7) to these three statements; furthermore, they selected 'strongly disagree' (Likert scale rating=1) in response to statement 8 'I don't like competing against other people'.



#### *6.4.1 Discussion: The impact of individual attitude on perceptions of competition*

Findings outlining the relationship between individual attitude and perceptions of competition will now be discussed. It is noteworthy that while the relationship between features of specific contexts (e.g. performance-oriented environments) and an increase in feelings of competition was acknowledged by more than half of the respondents, fewer referred to personal attitude towards competition as a factor influencing individuals' perceptions of competition (n=4). However, existing literature regarding achievement goal theory did not seem entirely aligned with these views, as Nicholls (1984) claimed that it was individuals' personal attitude and motivation towards specific goals that could result in competitive behaviours. Furthermore, more recent studies found that students with a strong tendency to outperform peers in competitive environments are more likely to work intensively towards their goals (Wolters, 2004).

Individuals' perceptions of competition, therefore, are likely to be created by an interaction of their own personal attitude towards competition and the learning context. This is particularly evident among this sample of respondents due to the agency these students have in deciding their involvement in competitive and non-competitive situations within the UoY Music Department; indeed, PhD students are undertaking individual, unique research projects and have flexibility of engagement in activities available within their learning environment. Consequently, the mediation created by this agency might contribute to explain these respondents' relatively moderate perception of competitiveness within the department (section 6.6.2). Thus, while PhD students who do not display a strongly competitive attitude can decide to avoid explicitly competitive situations, highly competitive individuals will have access to opportunities that align with their inclination to compete (e.g. performance auditions).

#### *6.4.2 Discussion: The impact of performance-oriented contexts*

Findings revealed that several respondents thought about competition in relation to a specific context. As indicated above (section 6.4), musical performance was deemed as particularly competitive by seven respondents, and these views are supported by

relevant literature outlining the high level of competitiveness linked to musical performances both in musical contests (McCormick, 2009) and within higher education institutions (Papageorgi et al., 2010). Performance-related competition might be linked with the specific educational context where respondents operated; indeed, all the respondents who reported having studied in a conservatoire (n=3) regarded that environment as particularly competitive. While investigating the reasons behind the perceived high competitiveness of conservatoires goes beyond the scope of this research, such difference might explain these respondents' perception of the UoY Music Department as a less competitive environment; indeed, as P5\_PhD stated with regard to their experience in conservatoire 'my current feeling of competition [at the UoY Music Department] is not nearly comparable with that I experienced in the past'. It might be the case, then, that a context where multiple music-related activities beyond performance are valued (such as research, recording and composing) could soften perceptions of competition for some of those students who had previous experiences of highly competitive performance-oriented environments.

## **6.5 Aspects prompting competition in the UoY Music Department**

This section discusses respondents' experiences of competition within the UoY Music Department. Responses highlighted that PhD students identified competition as influenced by three main areas: their PhD studies, the departmental culture and their proximity with other students.

Within their PhD studies, access to funding was deemed as competitive by several respondents (n= 6). Furthermore, 37% of the self-funded and partly-funded respondents reported comparing themselves with fully-funded peers, and one other respondent confirmed such perception of comparison: 'sometimes I felt that some [...] self-funded students are competitive with me' (P13\_PhD). Perceptions of competition for two respondents seemed to be triggered by the number of academic publications as related to those of their peers: 'I also felt competitive when I heard that others had published their articles' (P12\_PhD). Furthermore, some respondents experienced competition as comparative concerns in relation to other PhD students' progress and performance (n=6). For example, one respondent stated: 'I do feel like a rabbit in

headlights when everyone seems to be really productive and creative and I haven't written a thing in months' (P4\_PhD), while another reported: 'I think we compare each other's achievements or at what stage of our research we are' (P5\_PhD).

Seven respondents thought of competition in the department as determined by the culture of the department. Beyond those aspects that purely pertain to PhD studies such as research funding and academic publications, the department was regarded as an arena for competition; for example, six respondents referred to different levels of visibility among students in the department as something that weighed heavily on themselves. Two of them deemed the staff as responsible for such differences: 'at things like the PG forum, when members of the staff [complain] that not enough students go but then they only attend presentations that are musicology based, then it feels like my research is not as valued by the department' (P2\_PhD). Three respondents referred to a general sense of competitiveness toward peers who they perceived as obtaining greater recognition by the department: '[competition manifests itself in] the implicit presentation of certain students as the "stars" of the department, and the pressure this creates to match their level of achievement' (P4\_PhD). More specifically, some students (n=3) referred to the department's choices of which students' achievements to showcase on the department's social media channels as fostering competition among peers; one respondent indicated concerns in relation to the selection process: 'I think that there should be some policy in relation to how students' achievements are posted on social media' (P5\_PhD).

Respondents' perceptions of competition also seemed to be influenced by the degree of proximity with other students: particularly, but not only, fellow PhD students. Similarity of topic areas, for example, heightened the sense of competition for five respondents. P6\_PhD stated that being 'with a number of people who are doing the same thing as you', with 'similar experience and achievement as you' prompts feelings of competition. Lastly, proximity with British students impacted on some of the non-English-native respondents' sense of competition; indeed, 75% of them identified researching in their second language as fostering their sense of competition, and two expressed frustration at the extra pressure they felt to produce work comparable to that of their English-native peers: 'I always try to improve my language skills because I feel I always need to keep up. It is so frustrating not being able to do your best because of the language and everything would be much easier if I

were to do it in my own language' (P5\_PhD). One other student added: 'At the beginning of my research, I struggled quite a lot to get used to the idea that this probably will take me more time but it is normal' (P1\_PhD). This perceived relative slowness seemed to affect some respondents' feelings of competition towards their English-native peers.

### *6.5.1 Discussion: Students' perceptions of competition within their PhD*

Findings related to aspects prompting competition among respondents in relation to their PhD will now be discussed. Given the ongoing trend of decrease in public financial resources for higher education (Bolton, 2021; de Valero, 2001) and the influence of such resources on PhD students' completion rate (Ploskonka, 1993), competition in relation to aspects of funding mentioned by six respondents is unsurprising. Unfortunately, respondents did not add further details in relation to competitiveness linked to publications, but given their impact on early researchers' careers (Abbott, 2019) it is not surprising that these were deemed competitive by some respondents.

The implications of access to funding and achieving publications might contribute to explain the competitiveness reported by these respondents; indeed, funding and publications may create opportunities for some students and not for others. For example, PhD students at the UoY Music Department who win the competition for the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities (WROCAH) funding have access to specialised training aimed at developing essential research skills and post-PhD employability, including training on disseminating research within and beyond academia<sup>25</sup>. Thus, given the well-recognised impact of publications on young researchers' career development (Abbott, 2019; Horta & Santos, 2016), PhD students may feel under extreme pressure for early publications; therefore, undertaking specific post-PhD employability training within their doctoral studies might be a valuable opportunity for them. On the other hand, while access to such training creates disparity among PhD students, there is no automatic platform providing publications or other sources of research dissemination for WroCAH-funded students. This means

---

<sup>25</sup> For more details about the WROCAH funding, training and opportunities please visit the website: <https://wrocah.ac.uk/>

that these students do not have a preferential access to academic publications, and disparity relates to perceptions of training and, potentially, to the acquiring of skills and knowledge rather than access to privileged opportunities. Consequently, the impact of funding and consideration of publication is not bounded to the immediate context of the PhD but extends to professional development; students who receive post-PhD employability training might be perceived by some peers as being in a more advantageous position when it comes to competing for favourable positions within the music industry, which could heighten feelings of competition.

### *6.5.2 Discussion: The role of visibility*

Findings related to aspects prompting competition among respondents in relation to their involvement within the department will now be discussed. The showcasing of specific students' achievements was experienced by respondents as an aspect capable of triggering competitive feelings. Such opportunities were likely to produce different levels of visibility among students by creating 'stars' of the department, as pointed out by two respondents (section 6.5). Existing research in music education has revealed a relationship between increased visibility and privileged access to opportunities (Bennett et al., 2018; Griffiths, 2020). Interestingly, a similar relationship between visibility and competitive advantage was also mapped in other domains such as management (Smithson et al., 2011). As being showcased will make some students more visible than others, it is unsurprising that several respondents reported experiencing a sense of comparative pressure connected to such visibility, as highlighted in the findings (section 6.5). Furthermore, the competition toward peers who are perceived as more visible may have to do with the potential effects of visibility on future professional trajectories; students who receive this visible promotion might become more able to articulate themselves confidently and present their academic trajectories more persuasively compared to those who did not receive the same opportunities, which might result in some students having an advantaged position in professional competitive scenarios (e.g. stronger presentation of their *curriculum vitae*). Likewise, social media might also open up opportunities to students who are visible on that particular platform and, consequently, enhance their competitive advantage in professional scenarios; indeed, the showcase of selected students' achievement on the department's official social media channels makes the selected

students visible to external work providers, but such selection might reflect qualities other than a presumed higher quality of these students' works (e.g. availability to be showcased on social media, suitability of these students' works for social media platforms, etc.).

Something that may support departmental stakeholders in addressing visibility concerns is unconscious bias training, which is undertaken by some members of the academic staff of the UoY Music Department. This training supports understanding and overcoming unconscious bias in contexts such as an interview panel. While this is particularly important to create an inclusive environment, the training may focus more on not making assumptions regarding biases such as gender, ethnicity, and age; it does not necessarily discuss bias related to visibility. Furthermore, not all staff undertake this training as not all of them take part on interview panels. In fact, the relationship between visibility and feelings of competition reported by PhD students appears to contribute to shaping students' perception of institutional culture within the department; in particular, it seems to influence students' feeling of being under pressure to achieve visibility within the department as well as affect potential access to opportunities inside and outside the department.

Some responses suggested that feelings of competition might be higher among students who work within closely-related topic areas (section 6.5). It is likely, indeed, that these students get more opportunities to interact with each other and discuss their own work, for example through specific research forums within the department, which could intensify perceptions of peer competition (Garcia et al., 2013). Furthermore, researching in a second language also seemed to foster feelings of competition. This is not surprising as a second, or additional language has been acknowledged as a source of stress for international students (Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020) and delays in PhD completion (de Valero, 2001), which corroborates findings from this questionnaire outlining a sense of frustration and extra pressure to produce high-quality work among the majority of non-English native respondents (section 6.5). In fact, researching in their second language might have a specific impact on non-English native PhD students; indeed, all PhD students are required to produce high-standard written work which they will have to defend in front of a panel of examiners, not just in the Viva Voce examination but also in the thesis advisory meetings that take place twice a year in years 1-3 of PhD study. Therefore, respondents' perceived ability to

master their second language may have an impact on both students' self-perception and how they are perceived by their examiners, which also resulted in 'extra pressures' (P5) to keep up with the perceived advantage of their English-native peers.

## **6.6 Aspects softening perceptions of competition**

This section presents respondents' perceptions of aspects that contribute to softening competition within the UoY Music Department. A positive relationship with the supervisor was regarded by six respondents as particularly important to reduce feelings of competition in the department. Likewise, more than half of the respondents (n=8) regarded their academic supervisor as the person, alongside peers, who they would feel comfortable talking to about their feelings of competition within the department; P10\_PhD stated: 'I would feel free to talk about most subjects with my supervisor'. Furthermore, one student reported: 'My supervisor is very supportive and non-judgemental' (P5\_PhD), while another one claimed that 'trust' (P1\_PhD) was the main reason they would turn to their supervisor for support in dealing with competitive feelings. Thus, trust, support, experience and an understanding attitude of the supervisor were regarded as the most appreciated characteristics that contributed to identification of the supervisor as someone to be open with about aspects of competition within the department.

The general departmental atmosphere, described by one respondent as 'very much of supportive collegiality, rather than competitiveness' (P7\_PhD), seemed to discourage or alleviate feelings of competitiveness for just over half of the respondents (n=8), who reported feeling at ease to talk openly about negative experiences of competition with both fellow PhD students and other members of the department. Other aspects that contributed to the perception of the department as a mainly supportive environment were the promotion of positive attitudes towards competition through departmental opportunities and equality from members of the staff (n=4). In contrast with some respondents' perception of the staff as promoters of different levels of students' visibility in the department (section 6.5), P1\_PhD stated:

I believe that the most important [thing] is that there is equality from the staff members, lecturers, instrumental teachers etc. I have not noticed any

kind of preference for specific students or the other way around and this creates a very good base for a non-competitive department.

Furthermore, while the role of Graduate Teaching Assistants<sup>26</sup> (GTA) was recognised as partly competitive in relation to the selection process to obtain a GTA role and comparison with other GTAs' performances (n=3), their working environment was also described as supportive and motivating by four of the five respondents employed as GTAs.

The use of coping strategies also contributed to soften respondents' perceptions of competition. Talking to close friends within or outside the department (n=8) and the perception of the department – and the city – as a protected environment (n=2) seemed to help students deal with the effects of competition. For example, one respondent claimed: 'I know it will be [a] much, much more competitive environment outside York' (P6\_PhD). Others mentioned the feeling of being in control of the PhD (n=2). About half of the respondents (n=7) regarded competition avoidance as a useful coping strategy and some chose specific contexts in order to reduce competition: 'I have decided to reject any sort of competition and get more involved in less or non-competitive activities such as collaborative projects, ensembles and community-focused musicianship' (P4\_PhD).

Other coping strategies mentioned by respondents included self-focus, hard work and preparation for competitive situations (n=3), strategies aimed at reducing the emotional impact of competition such as exercise, healthy eating and sleeping habits, and separation between professional and private life (n=3). While not currently part of the department's offering, ten respondents thought that sessions aimed at helping students to cope with competition could be beneficial. In particular, workshops, student-led forums and discussion groups were considered as desirable supportive resources that the department might offer.

---

<sup>26</sup> Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are PhD students employed to assist on specific undergraduate or taught MA courses.



### *6.6.1 Discussion: The role of the supervisor in softening perceptions of competition*

Findings indicating the relevance of the supervisor in reducing competitive feelings among respondents will now be discussed. Given the significant impact of the academic supervisor on PhD students' completion rate (Barnes et al., 2010), quality of experience as doctoral students (Lovitts, 2001), and students' wellbeing (Blanchard & Haccoun, 2020), it is unsurprising that several respondents highlighted the significant role of the academic supervisor. Responses corroborate existing literature addressing a supportive supervisory relationship as key to PhD students' satisfaction (Dericks et al., 2019); indeed, supervisors were regarded by about half of the respondents as the main source of support they would turn to, alongside peers (section 6.6). Therefore, the relationship between doctoral students and supervisors might affect critically students' perceptions of competition and, as findings highlighted, was gauged positively by several respondents. On the other hand, while a number of respondents did not mention the contribution of supervisors in reducing perceptions of competition, neither did they argue against such perception and none of the students identified their supervisor as someone who enhanced their feelings of competitiveness. Thus, it can be concluded that the role of supervisors in supporting students dealing with competitive feelings in the UoY Music Department was generally acknowledged positively by this sample of PhD students.

### *6.6.2 Discussion: Departmental opportunities, equality and working environment*

The role of departmental opportunities, environment and staff attitude in reducing respondents' perceptions of competition will now be discussed. The perception of the UoY Music Department as a friendly, supportive environment was acknowledged by several respondents (n=6). A statement from P1\_PhD was particularly detailed in this regard:

There are opportunities offered to the students, in small groups, ensembles etc. which create a familiar environment and students get to

know each other better. The way these opportunities are given, I believe that they do not develop a “bad” kind of competition.

While some opportunities provided by the department are likely to entail some degree of competitiveness – for example auditions for specific ensembles and limited ensemble opportunities available for certain instruments – the general atmosphere of these ensembles and opportunities was judged as positive and non-competitive by these respondents. Interestingly, P1\_PhD referred to ‘small groups’ as a deterrent against ‘a bad kind of competition’. Therefore, it might be questioned whether the group size could affect students’ feelings of competition. As P1\_PhD’s answer suggested, students might feel that they have a stronger sense of community in smaller settings, which could be a powerful tool to help reduce comparison between members (Hendricks et al., 2016). Therefore, it could be speculated that opportunities where students get fewer chances to cultivate close relationships and, consequently, form a friendly community – as potentially could be the case in large-size groups – might foster a higher level of competition.

Perceived equality from members of the staff also plays a part in softening perceptions of competition, and the unconscious bias training that some academic staff have engaged with (mentioned in 6.5.2) could help increase awareness of the risks of unintentionally uneven behaviours towards students. However, as findings in section 6.5 outlined, it must be acknowledged that these views were in contrast with some other respondents (P2\_PhD; P11\_PhD) who felt that some staff might exacerbate competitiveness and inequality by endorsing or accepting different levels of visibility among students.

The working environment of the department was described as friendly rather than competitive by the majority of those employed as GTAs. Consistently with research outlining the benefits of socialisation among the PhD community within departments (Gardner, 2010), these findings shed light on the importance of a supportive and collegial environment in disincentivising competition. On the other hand, the process of applying for GTA positions is inherently competitive and, as highlighted in section 6.5, other aspects of competition in relation to visibility, social media and opportunities were also acknowledged by respondents. Consequently, some forms of competition will inevitably take place in environments where

individuals undertake research in similar area of interests and socialise with each other (Garcia et al., 2013), but findings from this sample of PhD students seem to suggest that the presentation of opportunities as collaborative or competitive, as well as the staff's attitude towards students is likely to influence how students perceive a given environment in relation to competition. While environmental, social, political and pedagogical characteristics differ in each UK department and university, and the sample of respondents is not large enough to generalise findings, it could be speculated that students' perception of the culture of the UoY Music Department is also influenced by both aspects prompting and softening competition. The complexity of higher education departments is indeed evidenced by those positive and negative 'unintended consequences' that these learning contexts have on students' approach to learning (Ramsden, 1997, p. 199), and these findings might suggest that their influence on students' perceptions of competition might play a role in determining students' overarching perception of their department.

### *6.6.3 Discussion: The use of coping strategies*

Findings in relation to respondents' use of coping strategies to deal with competition will now be discussed. Most respondents seemed to be able to respond effectively to demands arising from competitiveness. PhD students' agency to decide the extent of their own involvement with the department and, consequently, with its competitiveness, obviously contributed to shield some of them from potentially distressing levels of competition. However, other aspects were likely to contribute to respondents' ability to cope positively with competition.

Some students seemed to be at ease with the idea of disengaging from competition. For example, P12\_PhD stated: 'now I have a more positive opinion on [competition] as I think it can be a way to make progress by myself and I start to allow myself to be not the best'. '. Transition from secondary school to university might be extremely challenging for most students as the majority of music students at university level will be competing for auditions and opportunities with other students of similar or even higher musical skills, which can result in feelings from disorientation to loss of confidence (Winterson & Russ, 2009). Such circumstances will have already been experienced by PhD students and it might be the case that this experience led to them

feeling more equipped to deal with challenges related to competition, or, more motivated to avoid it.

The older and varied age group of the PhD students might also account for a greater ability to cope with competition. Some of them may have families and well-established support bubbles of friends and while issues concerning familial situations might be particularly disruptive for PhD students (Byers et al., 2014), family support is critical for both persistence and academic success (Breitenbach et al., 2019; Volkert et al., 2018). Therefore, this support network is likely to contribute to help them disengage or deal better with competitive situations. In conclusion, the flexibility of the PhD programme that allows students to self-determine their involvement in the department together with prior experiences of competition, older age, and potential access to strong support bubbles are likely to be important factors in defining PhD students' ability to cope with the demands of competition.

## 6.7 Relationship between PhD students' mental wellbeing and perceptions of competition

Through open questions and one Likert scale, respondents expressed their own thoughts, views and experiences regarding the relationship between perceptions of competition within their PhD and mental health. Their perceptions of their own mental health were investigated through a 7-point Likert scale, whose statements are presented below in Table 6.2. All 15 respondents completed this Likert scale and a graphical representation of students' responses to each statement is provided in Appendix H.

*Table 6.2: Likert scale statements investigating PhD Music students' assessment of their own mental health*

Statement Number	Item
1	'In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition'
2	'I developed a mental health condition while at university'
3	'I often feel isolated'
4	'I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my PhD research'
5	'I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help'
6	'I often feel worried or anxious'

Respondents' answers to the Likert scale statements indicated that most of them did not receive a mental health-related diagnosis nor developed a mental health condition in connection to their higher education studies<sup>27</sup>. Likewise, almost two thirds (n=9) of them did not perceive their mental health as dependent on their PhD studies, disagreeing to various extents with statement 4, whilst four others agreed. Opinions were more varied in relation to respondents experiencing feelings of worry or anxiety, with six of them answering either 'strongly disagree', 'disagree' or 'somewhat disagree' (Likert scale ratings=1; 2; 3) and eight agreeing to various extents (Likert scale ratings=5; 6; 7) to statement 6.

Through open-ended questions, all respondents acknowledged feelings of competition as something that can impact on individuals' mental wellbeing and, in some cases, on their mental health. In particular, anxiety, depression and lack of confidence were regarded by six respondents as potential consequences of acute feelings of competition; for example, one respondent referred to high levels of competition as something that 'has the potential to damage confidence/encourage maladaptive behaviours' (P9\_PhD). Furthermore, four respondents reported personal experiences of a negative reaction to competitive situations, with one of them stating they would 'get a really negative feeling when engaging in competition' (P4\_PhD). Differently, P11\_PhD reported not having a competitive attitude by stating 'I no longer feel compelled to participate in arena mentality'; this comment corroborates this respondent's answer 'strongly disagree' to all statements reported in Table 6.2 (see Appendix H).

All respondents had different attitudes and experiences of competition and, therefore, the impact that such experiences had on their wellbeing varied considerably. Some did not perceive any personal mental health changes in relation to competition experienced in their PhD (n=8), and three others even reported an increase in their wellness since starting their PhD: 'I don't really feel the environment

---

<sup>27</sup> The majority of respondents (n=10) answered 'strongly disagree' to statement 1 ('In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition') while only four of them answered either 'strongly agree' (n=1) or 'agree' (n=3). Similarly, ten respondents disagreed to various extents to the statement 'I developed a mental health condition while at university' (n=2 answered 'somewhat disagree'; n=2 answered 'disagree'; n=6 answered 'strongly disagree') while a third of respondents agreed (n=3 selected 'somewhat agree'; n=2 selected 'agree').

competitive, especially compared to my previous experiences. I feel more supported here than in any of my previous institutions, which makes my mental health more stable' (P13\_PhD). Four respondents reported experiencing a generally positive relationship between the process of undertaking the PhD and the development of self-confidence. One of them, for example, stated: 'my MA and PhD have developed my critical thinking skills in such a way that I feel more equipped to [...] reflect on and analyse all aspects of my life to better cope with all situations' (P10\_PhD). Furthermore, feelings of competition arising from the PhD were positively associated with enhanced discipline, motivation to improve and excitement (n=3). One respondent who reported struggling with mental health regarded their PhD as 'a positive' aspect of their life whilst considering their mental health issues as 'separate' from the PhD (P9\_PhD).

Nonetheless, a negative impact of undertaking a PhD on some respondents' mental wellbeing was not absent, as two reported feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and lack of confidence due to competition relating to funding, publications and peers' visibility on the department's official social media channels. Lastly, three who were not English natives mentioned a sense of frustration and extra pressure arising from competitive feelings towards their peers in relation to writing and researching in their second language; in this regard, P6\_PhD reported feeling 'not confident' about their research skills while P12\_PhD referred to language as an aspect that can 'cause nervousness, anxiety and stress' in relation to several aspects, including researching and writing in an individual's second language.

### *6.7.1 Discussion: Responses to mental wellbeing issues arising from competition*

Despite evidence in recent literature of increased and intensified mental health concerns among the PhD student population (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017), findings from this questionnaire suggest a prevalent positive relationship between respondents' status as doctoral students and their own mental health; the high number of 'strongly disagree' responses (n=10) to statement 1 in Table 6.2 indicated that most students had not received a diagnosis of a mental health condition at the time of the data collection. However, unlike studies demonstrating a significant

correlation between undertaking the PhD and mental health deterioration (Sverdlik et al., 2018), only four respondents out of 15 regarded their mental health as dependent on their PhD (statement 4). As previously outlined in section 6.6.3, these findings suggest that the impact of competition on PhD students' mental wellbeing could be moderated by these students' supervisory relationship, older age, past experiences of competition in higher education, strong support bubble and individuality of their PhD.

On the other hand, competitive feelings related to PhD study were acknowledged by a few students as potentially affecting their mental wellbeing. For example, as mentioned in the above findings (section 6.7), three students referred to the impact that writing and researching in a second language has on them. While the differences between English native and non-native speakers are likely to be softened in performance activities, non-native PhD students regarded these differences as an impairment. Existing literature has identified the language barrier as an extra-challenge for international PhD students (Brown & Holloway, 2008); achieving a PhD requires students to produce high-standard written work and it is not surprising that international students found this process particularly stressful. For example, one of them stated: 'researching in the second language cannot be as efficient as researching in the first language and I also have to solve any problems arose during research in this second language which brings extra pressures on me' (P12\_PhD). Therefore, frustration and extra pressure might have had a negative impact on these students' wellbeing.

The above discussion implies that while some of the respondents' wellbeing was affected to some extent by PhD-related competitive aspects, PhD students could be equipped to deal with the potential impact that competitiveness could have on their wellbeing (section 6.6.3); however, some considerations must be taken into account. As detailed above, recent literature outlines a worrying prevalence of mental health conditions among PhD students as compared to other higher education students (Levecque et al., 2017), while the findings of this research seem to describe a more positive situation. Nonetheless, it is vital to acknowledge that students' answers to this questionnaire were aimed at unveiling the particular relationship between mental wellbeing and competition and other aspects were not necessarily considered. Consequently, the findings are not in contrast with previous literature outlining the impact of factors other than competition on PhD students' mental health and

wellbeing. Furthermore, this questionnaire was distributed to students from one UK music department and, as such, focuses solely on the perspectives of a sample of students who all work in the same department, have access to similar sources of support and operate in the same institutional culture. In conclusion, the interpretation of these findings should not be disjointed from their specific research context and, even more importantly, must retain the specific connection between mental health and aspects of competition.

## **6.8 The impact of PhD study on preparation for competition in a future professional capacity**

Data analysis revealed a tendency for these respondents to associate PhD-related feelings of competition with future professional goals; specifically, respondents' answers indicated a relevant focus on the impact of undertaking a PhD on their approach to competitiveness in the profession.

The process of undertaking a PhD was perceived as a helpful tool to deal with competitiveness in a future professional capacity by almost all respondents (n=14); answers in this regard mainly referred to the positive impact of PhD on confidence development (n=5), coping with competitiveness in the profession (n=6), and the building of work-relevant skills (n=6). Significantly, one respondent stated:

I believe that having more knowledge always helps to be better and in this case, undertaking a PhD will help me to expand my knowledge which in turn will make me stronger, more confident and ready to deal with any sort of competitiveness (P1\_PhD).

Only one student disagreed with this prevalent perspective by stating: 'I think the PhD is still a bubble. You don't experience the institutional/political aspects that are embedded in the workplace' (P5\_PhD). Furthermore, findings highlighted a general positive perception of the relationship between competition experienced within the PhD and professional development; several responses outlined the confidence that doing a PhD might also result in a positive practical and psychological attitude towards



competitiveness in profession: 'PhD experience will equip me with the required practical skills and also help me to establish a good psychological status' (P12\_PhD).

Respondents were also asked about their professional aspirations. Their answers showed varied and diversified career prospects, and while some students (n=8) had a clear picture of the type of jobs they would like to undertake in the future, others (n=5) did not provide specific information in this regard, and one respondent was already fully employed. Interestingly, all respondents who decided to share their professional aspirations regarded academia as a professional career output (n=8) while three considered pursuing other professional careers alongside academia; for example, music teaching, accompanying or developing personal businesses. However, there was variance with regard to the level of competitiveness expected in academia compared to other professional careers: academia was perceived as more competitive than other types of careers by three respondents, and the perception of academia as a prestigious environment added to its competitiveness (n=2). Five students did not feel any relevant difference between competitiveness in academia and other professional outputs.

### *6.8.1 Discussion: Dealing with competition in a professional capacity*

Most respondents were confident that their PhD would provide them with helpful tools to deal with competition in their future professional capacity; in particular, they believed the PhD could positively contribute to support the development of work-related skills and growth in self-confidence. Unsurprisingly, none of the respondents questioned the existence of some degree of competitiveness within a professional capacity, though not all of them were keen on undertaking extremely competitive career opportunities. It cannot be excluded that awareness of the high levels of competition within the music industry (Bartleet et al., 2019; Bennett & Burnard, 2016) influences students' choices of professional trajectories; however, one respondent reported not to have any choice but joining a competitive environment.

As the PhD students are a heterogeneous group, perceptions of the impact of PhD studies on professional development are likely to depend on the different individual range of experiences and involvement in specific activities. For example, students with experience as GTAs might have a more detailed idea of competitiveness embedded in higher education teaching compared to those who are not involved in

any teaching. Furthermore, the diversity of experience is likely to have implications on students' expectations towards their PhD trajectories; students with years or months of working experience both as GTAs or in external jobs might be more aware of the competitiveness entailed in that particular professional capacity and, therefore, they could be more discriminating in their objectives for PhD study, for example, by expecting to gain specific work-relatable skills from the PhD as compared to those students with no or limited working experience.

Unsurprisingly, just over half respondents referred to academia as their main career aspiration after completing their PhD. Given the significant relationship between PhD and academic trajectories as well as the high level of competitiveness within academia (Levin, 2006), a separate subsection will now discuss respondents' perceptions of competitiveness in academia.

### *6.8.2 Discussion: Perceptions of competitiveness in academia*

Findings highlighted that academia was regarded as a potential or prioritised career output by eight respondents (section 6.8). Among these students, the doctoral degree was perceived as preparatory for the profession, but their views on the level of competitiveness expected in academia were more varied. As findings in section 6.8 highlighted, only three respondents identified academia as a particularly competitive career, while five others did not express a strong opinion concerning the level of competition in academia, but identified some differences between academia and other musical professions; among them, P8\_PhD said: 'I feel that there is immense pressure as a performer to be the best at as young an age as possible but when building an academic career, the longer you are studying and researching for dictates your level'. Such perception informs a less hierarchical conception of competitiveness; indeed, the respondent seemed to imply that competitiveness in academia is dampened by the recognition of ability that comes with experience. Nonetheless, this softer perception is in contrast with literature describing academia as an exceptionally competitive environment (Carson et al., 2013) where fair competition is often jeopardised by gender inequality (Andersson et al., 2021; Lundine et al., 2019).

Interestingly, respondents did not mention some of the most prominently competitive aspects of academia, for example the networking element, which has been viewed as particularly important in this field (Baruch & Hall, 2004; Gardner &

Barnes, 2007). As such, respondents did not seem to take into account some characteristics connected to the competitiveness of the profession that they will be highly likely to encounter when working in academia. While these findings might suggest the existence of a gap between students' expectations towards the level and type of competitiveness experienced in academia and the actual reality of the academic profession, the size of this sample does not allow strong conclusions to be reached; therefore, it would be relevant to investigate further the relationship between preparation for academia through undertaking doctoral studies and the competitive reality of academia through a bigger sample of respondents.

## **6.9 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the perceptions of competition among a group of PhD Music students from one UK music department. The questionnaire was distributed to all PhD students and despite emailed reminders the response rate was low: only 15 students completed the questionnaire.

Respondents' perceptions of the level of competition in the department and, ultimately, their ability to respond to competitive situations, was affected by aspects such as individual attitude and learning contexts. While personal attitude towards competition played a relevant role in determining students' willingness to be involved in competition, the learning contexts were regarded by respondents as having a crucial impact on their perceptions. Performance-oriented contexts, unsurprisingly, were acknowledged as triggering a particularly high level of competition; in particular, three respondents who reported having been previously trained in performance-oriented learning environments, deemed the UoY Music Department as much less competitive compared to their previous institutions. PhD Music students' perceptions of competition in relation to musical performance and performance-oriented contexts could be of interest for tertiary-level institutions; indeed, further research could investigate how students' diversified prior experiences of competition in performance and educational environment might influence their choice of academic or practical study at Master and PhD level.

The responses contributed to outline a twofold overview of competition in the UoY Music Department. If, on the one hand, competition was inevitably experienced

within the context of the department through funding, publications, researching in second language for some students, and different levels of students' visibility, several answers, on the other, indicated capability to deal with such competitiveness among PhD students. Furthermore, the presentation of departmental opportunities as collaborative rather than competitive, equality from the staff, and agency of involvement within the department contributed to outline the department as a largely supportive and collegial environment. For example, even though several respondents referred to general performance activities as particularly competitive, their individual PhD topic may enable agency concerning their involvement in and/or exposure to performance and this might have contributed to lower their perceptions of competition<sup>28</sup>. Students' older age, past experiences of competition in higher education, strong support bubbles and positive relationship with their supervisors also contributed to such prevalent perception.

The moderate level of competitiveness experienced by this sample of students within the department was mirrored in the relatively low impact of competition on respondents' mental wellbeing; answers to statements reported in Table 6.2 evidenced that only a minority acknowledged a connection between their perceptions of competition within their PhD and negative mental health. On the other hand, respondents referred to the potential impact of competition on individuals' wellbeing throughout the data set, and the majority of emotions mentioned by respondents could be labelled as negative: anxiety and stress largely outnumbered all the other emotional states mentioned by respondents in connection with competition. Such emphasis on emotional response to competition is not surprising as it corroborates other literature indicating the potential impact of competition on musicians' wellbeing and mental health (Demirbatir, 2015; Gross & Musgrave, 2017; Pecen et al., 2016; Perkins et al., 2017).

Among this sample of respondents, the PhD was perceived as an important step in relation to competitiveness in the professional world. Unsurprisingly, academia

---

<sup>28</sup> To protect their anonymity respondents were not asked to detail the type of research they were undertaking, composition, performance or by thesis, but all PhD students are required to produce original pieces of work, and those students who are enrolled in PhD performance-based research aim to find original and unique approaches to performance through research. Therefore, it might be the case that these PhD students do not articulate this kind of performance as competitively as they would in circumstances where they compete with other students for prestigious performance opportunities unconnected to research, such as the concerto audition, and orchestral opportunities.

was regarded as a potential career direction by several respondents, but their varied perceptions of competitiveness within academia did not match literature identifying academia as an extremely competitive career; indeed, only a few respondents identified academia as a particularly prestigious and competitive environment. Beyond the different perspectives about academia, the ability to cope with competitiveness in a working environment was perceived by many respondents as something that could be learned through the commitment, dedication and focus required for doing a PhD. Specifically, the development of self-confidence and work-specific skills was considered part of the personal and professional growth that takes place through the PhD, which would support respondents in dealing with competitiveness arising in the workplace.

Findings from this questionnaire seem to suggest that PhD students within the music department of this UK university might perceive that specific environment as not excessively competitive, as individuality of research and potential disengagement from the performance side of music for some of them might soften their perceptions of competition. Furthermore, their older age, well-established support bubbles, agency over involvement in the department, and prior experiences are likely to contribute to moderate involvement in competitive situations. Therefore, such specificities indicate that the acknowledgment of different perceptions of competition across categories of music students with different specialisation and experiences might enable a more nuanced insight into how students think, perceive and respond to competition in tertiary-level UK institutions.

# **Chapter 7: Taught MA Music students’ perspectives on competition within the UoY Music Department**

## **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the multiple perceptions of competition among a sample of 33 postgraduate students enrolled in taught MA courses offered by the Music Department of the University of York, UK. Findings will be discussed in relation to six major themes: respondents’ conceptualisation of competition; factors prompting perceptions of competition within the department; factors softening perceptions of competition within the department; respondents’ previous experience of competition in higher education; relationship between respondents’ perceptions of competition and their mental wellbeing; respondents’ perceptions of competition as connected to their desired professional careers.

A questionnaire was used to collect data. While the questionnaire retained a similar structure to the one distributed to undergraduate students, some questions were condensed to reduce the overall length of the questionnaire. Despite the efforts made to find a good balance between the necessity to gather qualitative data and the length of the questionnaire, the response rate was low; 33 responses were obtained from a sample of 147 MA students<sup>29</sup> (22.4%) enrolled in the UoY Music Department at the time of the data collection. Similarly to the other cohorts of students, the lockdown resulting from Covid-19 prevented the researcher from actively promoting the questionnaire within the department and is likely to have contributed to a low response rate.

In compliance with ethical standard requirements, the questionnaire did not require personally identifying information from respondents, other than through questions to gain demographic data which included one question regarding the specific MA course in which respondents were enrolled; indeed, the disclosure of this

---

<sup>29</sup> For practical reasons, respondents in this chapter will be identified as MA students. When needed, the programme specification will be given.

information, while relevant for my research, embedded a very low risk of identification due to the high number of MA students enrolled in the department (n=147) on a number of programmes. Furthermore, my proximity with MA students was limited to my GTA commitment, in the form of weekly teaching sessions with a small group of 10 students from one MA taught course. In consideration of a low but not absent risk of identification, the answer to the question on MA students' MA course or study pathway was not compulsory to proceed with the questionnaire.

## 7.2 Procedure

The questionnaire was designed after the distribution of the one for PhD students and adjusted in accordance with the specificities of the taught MA programmes. Prior to distribution, two MA students enrolled in the UoY Music Department at that time, one British and one international, were invited to complete a pilot version of the questionnaire and were encouraged to provide feedback regarding its length, clarity and relevance of the questions. The choice to run pilots with one British and one international student was related to the high percentage of international students enrolled across all the MA programmes (69%); in consideration of such high prevalence of international students, feedback on the questionnaire from one of them in advance of data collection was particularly desirable.

The questionnaire was distributed in June 2020 via email invitation to all 147 postgraduate students enrolled in taught MA courses at the University of York Music Department and two reminders were sent to students one week apart. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, multiple choice questions and three 7-point Likert scales to assess respondents' agreement with statements, with options to answer ranging from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (7). As noted in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.3), data from the Likert scale used in this questionnaire was intended to illuminate the qualitative findings and not used for statistical purposes. For this reason, all respondents' entries for each Likert scale item are presented in Appendix I, which allowed the researcher to compare and contrast individual Likert scale responses with qualitative remarks made by respondents. All respondents were informed that completion of the questionnaire would be anonymous and their identity would not be

revealed to the researcher or within the research output. The link to the full data set is available in Appendix D.

### 7.3 Demographic data

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 33 students. Figure 7.1 provides a graphical representation of respondents' demographic data.

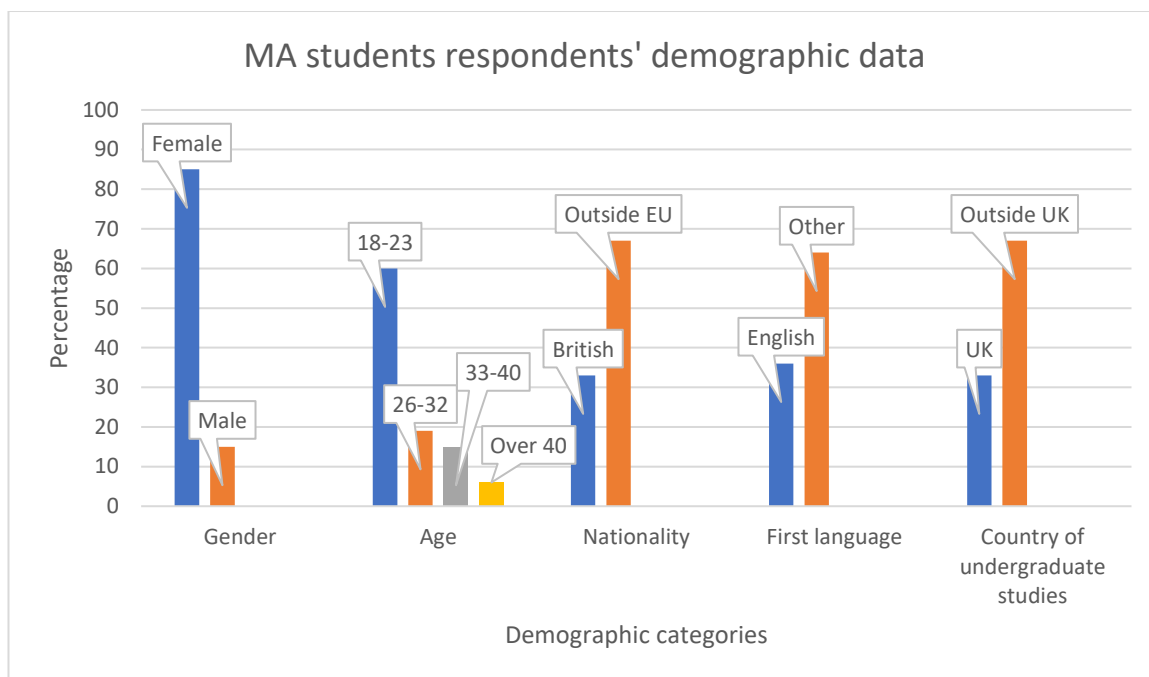


Figure 7.1: MA respondents' demographic data

Most respondents (n=28) identified themselves as female (85%), five as male (15%). Over half (n=20) were aged 18-25 (60%), six were between 26 and 32 (19%), five between 33 and 40 (15%) and two were over 40 (6%). Two thirds of respondents (n=22) were international students (67%), 11 were British (33%) while no respondent regarded themselves as European. Likewise, two thirds of them (n=22) attended their undergraduate studies in a country outside the UK (67%) while 11 had gained a Bachelor degree in a UK university (33%). English was the first language of 12 respondents (36%) while the remaining 21 had English as their second language (64%).

Among the respondents who decided to disclose their MA programme (n=29), 18 (62%) were enrolled on the Music Education: Instrumental and Vocal Teaching MA, six (21%) were attending a performance-based pathway (e.g. MA in Piano Studies, Ma in Vocal Studies), two (7%) were studying the MA in Music Production, two (7%) the



MA in Community Music and one (3%) studied the composition pathway of the MA Music. Figure 7.2 provides a graphical representation of respondents' different MA programmes<sup>30</sup>.

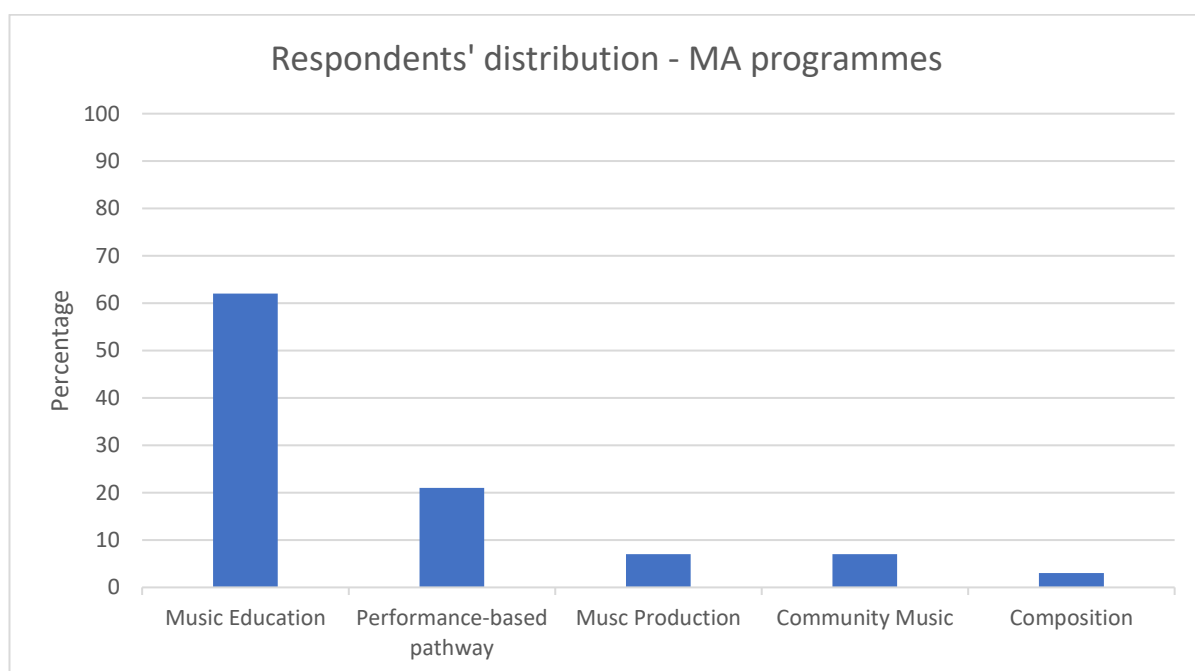


Figure 7.2: Respondents' distribution across MA programmes

## 7.4 MA students' conceptualisations of competition

In this section, findings relating to how respondents' attitudes affected their conceptualisation of competition will be presented. Seven respondents described competition in emotional terms; four of these seven labelled it as 'stressful and painful' (P9\_MA) while the other three had a more nuanced feeling that P4\_MA, for example, described as 'exciting but also have pressure'. For five respondents the concept of competition was in contrast with the enjoyment of making music, which was deemed by these students as more important than competing, to the point that one of them who used to take part in performance competitions 'stopped competing as I now completely object to the premise of competition in music-making' (P15\_MA).

About half of the respondents (n=16) reported having developed a self-focussed attitude towards competition. These students did not necessarily disengage

<sup>30</sup> Due to formatting constraints, demographic data regarding respondents' MA programme enrolment could not be included in the first graphic. A second graphic has thus been included.

with peer comparison, but perceived competition as mainly connected to their own individual improvement; P17\_MA, for example, stated: 'I just want to do as well as I can in my own circumstances and hope to achieve or exceed what I initially set out to do'. Among these respondents, three of them regarded their self-focussed attitude to competition as the product of a gradual learning process. While P16\_MA, for example, had 'learned to not compare [...] with other people's achievements', P14\_MA was 'gradually trying to focus on what I am capable of doing rather than worry what my peers are doing'. Conversely, only three respondents explicitly referred to competition as an externally-driven force and only one student regarded themselves as having a non-competitive attitude, though several respondents (n=17) mentioned having experienced some degree of competition at some point within the department.

Respondents' attitudes towards competition were further investigated through a 7-point Likert scale investigating levels of agreement with a set of statements presented below in Table 7.1. Some of these statements (statements 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) were derived from the Revised Competitiveness Index (RCI), as appropriate to evaluate respondents' enjoyment of competition (Houston et al., 2002). The other statements (statements 1, 2, 8, 9) were created to gather data in relation to students' responses to competitive situations that the RCI did not display. All 33 respondents completed this Likert scale statement ratings; for a full graphical representation of answers to each statement, please consult Appendix I.

*Table 7.1: Likert scale statements investigating MA Music students' attitudes towards competition*

<b>Statement number</b>	<b>Item</b>
1	'I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition'
2	'I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations'
3	'I regard myself as a competitive person'
4	'I often try to outperform other people'
5	'I try to avoid competing with others'
6	'I don't like competing against other people'
7	'I find competitive situations unpleasant'
8	'I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense'
9	'I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me'

Findings from the Likert scale above indicated that this cohort of respondents held varied views in relation to their attitudes towards competition; for example, 16 of them agreed to various extents with statement 3 ('I regard myself as a competitive person') while 11 disagreed. The same number (n=16) responded either 'somewhat agree', 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to the statement 'I often try to outperform other people' whilst 11 disagreed. Notably, only answers to statement 9 ('I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me') were generally oriented toward one extremity of the scale: 25 respondents agreed to various extents (Likert scale ratings=5; 6; 7) whilst only four disagreed (Likert scale ratings=1; 3). Similarly to undergraduate students (see Chapter 5, section 5.4), some of the MA students' additional qualitative remarks on competition corroborates their Likert scale answers: P15\_MA, for example, who 'strongly agreed' with statements 5, 6, 7 and 8 (see above, Table 7.1) reported having 'realised [during their undergraduate degree] how debilitating [competition] is for real music-making'.

Further open questions revealed that, rather unsurprisingly, 14 respondents emphasised the relationship between competition and music performance. Unfortunately, only a few students offered specific details regarding their understanding of competition in relation to musical performance; four of them had taken part in contests that were regarded as 'debilitating' (P15\_MA) or anxiety-triggering (P7\_MA). The perception of competition as inevitable was shared by four other respondents who perceived it as necessary to achieve success, particularly in areas like performance (P18\_MA) or more generally in the job market (P17\_MA; P25\_MA). On the other hand, comparison was seen by four respondents as a temptation, particularly when related to peer comparison as 'it's easy to get caught up in the "numbers" side of feedback, or trying to spot [others'] mistakes in performances' (P2\_MA). A few other students (n=2) regarded competition as 'not necessary' (P11\_MA); for example, P14\_MA believed that 'constantly comparing yourself to others isn't going to help your personal development as a musician'.

#### *7.4.1 Discussion: MA students' conceptualisations of competition*

Respondents had mixed views regarding the role of competition within their present studies and future professional life. Some of them believed competition to be an

inevitable part of life, while others, instead, disagreed (see findings in 7.4) and considered comparison either as a temptation or unnecessary. This second category of respondents seemed to hold a flexible opinion and believe that individuals have agency to decide the extent to which they would like to be involved in competitive situations. While both perspectives were likely to be the product of respondents' personal experiences, individual traits, and self-perception, it might be interesting to understand what the implications of perceiving competition as inevitable or avoidable might be on music students' choices within their study and approach to their professional career; indeed, it is plausible that students who think that they will necessarily face competition are more inclined to embrace opportunities they deem as competitive and disregard the potential negative effects of operating in competitive environments, while students who deem competition as unnecessary might reject competitive opportunities even when these could be beneficial to their professional or personal development.

#### *7.4.2 Discussion: MA students' attitudes towards competition*

Findings suggested that respondents whose feelings of competition were self-directed outnumbered those who explicitly reported experiencing competition as directed toward their peers. Most respondents did not detail what prompted them to compete primarily with themselves, but some of them mentioned a personal growth path that enabled them to mature and focus more on their own achievements. Furthermore, students may not get the same opportunities in a one-year MA course to compete with peers as they would in a three-year BA course. As will be detailed in section 7.7, at least one MA student who had continued from undergraduate music study in this department seemed to back up this explanation by stating that the reduced sense of community in their one-year MA compared to their BA 'result[ed] in fewer direct comparisons and chats about our marks' (P2\_MA). Another possibility is that disengagement from musical performances enabled some respondents to reduce the competition toward their peers; indeed, while the findings above suggested that several respondents conceptualised competition in music as specifically connected to performance, demographic data show that only six respondents out of 33 were enrolled in performance-based MA courses. Thus, by avoiding the exposure connected

to performance, some students might have disengaged with peer comparison and, instead, become more focussed on their own achievements.

It might also be worth considering whether a social stigma towards displaying an externally-driven competitive behaviour might have influenced respondents. Literature suggests that students who endorse a strong performance-approach goals – namely ‘the desire to outperform others’ (Dompnier et al., 2013, p. 588) – have lower probability to be liked by their social group, which decreases their *social desirability*, intended as ‘the degree to which [individuals] are liked [by the members of a given social group]’ (p. 589). Therefore, it cannot not be excluded that some students’ answers might have been shaped by self-presentation concerns that motivated them to ‘appear likeable and learning-oriented rather than competitive’ (Crouzevialle & Butera, 2017, p. 74).

## **7.5 Aspects prompting competition among MA students in the UoY Music Department**

Throughout the data set, respondents reported experiencing different competitive feelings within the UoY Music Department in relation to several aspects. Nine respondents explicitly reported experiencing competition as peer comparison. P2\_MA, for example, described their experience of competition as ‘individuals directly comparing themselves with other students, in academic module marks, or their performance in concerts’, while another student reported a tendency to ‘compare what other people have achieved with mine, be it the marking of essays or chances of getting a future job’ (P13\_MA). Furthermore, for four respondents, experiences of peer comparison were translated into pressure to keep up with their peers’ achievements or commitments; for example, despite perceptions of fewer comparisons of marks mentioned above by P2\_MA, P16\_MA, stated that when one of their peers gets a higher mark ‘it makes you question what you did not do well, in order to achieve a similar or higher mark’.

Feelings of peer competition among respondents were also created by opportunities offered by the department: in particular, performance opportunities such as lunchtime concerts and auditions for ensembles were regarded as particularly competitive by 12 respondents, while fewer students (n=4) reported feeling

competitive with regard to opportunities related to composition (e.g. calls for scores within the department) and teaching activities, but did not provide further details. Three respondents had direct or indirect experience of competition in relation to access to the practice rooms, and one of them stated: ‘I think the competition for the right to use the [largest grand] piano room is really interesting. I often hear my professional piano friends talk about these funny things (they may be very angry, but I always find it funny)’ (P3\_MA).

Another aspect that produced feelings of competition among respondents concerned their response to assessments, marks and feedback. Through a 7-point Likert scale, respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement to eight statements paired with the sentence ‘In the context of my programme of study, my feelings of competition increase when...’. Statements are presented below in Table 7.2. 32 respondents completed this Likert scale but one respondent did not answer statement 4 and one other did not answer statements 1, 2, 3. A graphical representation of students’ answers to each statement is provided in Appendix I.

*Table 7.2: Likert scale statements investigating MA Music students’ perceptions of competition in relation to assessments*

<b>Statement Number</b>	<b>Item</b>
1	I am taking part in a project of my choice
2	An activity is academic-based
3	An activity is non-academic based (e.g. teaching, performing, recording, etc.)
4	An assessment is worth a large number of credits
5	I feel an activity is linked to my career-related goals
6	My emotional investment in an activity is substantial

Respondents’ answers to the Likert scale statements seem to identify a slight prevalence of competitive feelings in relation to non-academic based activities in comparison with academic ones: while 22 respondents agreed to various extents with statement 3 ‘In the context of my programme of study, my feelings of competition increase when an activity is non-academic based (e.g. teaching, performing, recording, etc.)’ and eight disagreed, 14 selected either ‘somewhat agree’, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ as an answer to statement 2 and ten disagreed. Furthermore, respondents’ feelings of competition seemed to increase particularly when engaging in

departmental activities that had a clear connection with their professional aspirations (statement 5) and when their emotional investment in these activities was substantial (statement 6)<sup>31</sup>.

Answers throughout the questionnaire showed that performance assessments and oral presentations were deemed as particularly competitive by 12 respondents, particularly in relation to the exposure they entail by 'involv[ing] the rest of the class' (P2\_MA) and seven students felt a higher degree of competition when undertaking written exams or giving assessed lessons. Surprisingly, there was not a noticeable difference between students' perceptions of summative and formative assessments, as only three respondents reported perceiving summative assessments as more competitive than formative ones.

While only one respondent out of 33 explicitly stated not feeling any competition in relation to marks, for 13 respondents sharing their marks with peers prompted comparison, at least to some extent: '[sharing my marks has] the main impact on my feelings of competition. While we are sharing the results, we know who gets better performance. Thus, comparison among peers is caused' (P25\_MA). Furthermore, sharing marks with peers generated some strong emotional responses among eight students; in particular, mark sharing was deemed as 'potentially toxic sometimes' (P2\_MA), 'really stressful' (P26\_MA) and a habit that has the potential to 'bring my mood down' (P14\_MA). On the other hand, only five MA students chose to keep their marks private, while three respondents were unhappy to share their marks with peers but did not specify whether they felt compelled to share or not.

Some students, however, believed that mark sharing represents an opportunity to develop better self-awareness; indeed, for two students, receiving a lower mark than their peers turned into a motivation to do better, while two others reported becoming progressively less affected by marks and concentrating more on feedback. In this regard, written feedback was regarded as less competitive than numerical marks by 15 respondents; its individuality and uniqueness, as outlined by six respondents,

---

<sup>31</sup> In relation to statement 5, two respondents answered 'strongly agree', 12 answered 'agree' and eight 'agree', whilst four answered 'somewhat disagree', one 'disagree' and five 'strongly disagree'. In relation to statement 6, two respondents answered 'strongly agree', 12 'agree', six 'somewhat agree' while one answered 'somewhat disagree', one 'disagree' and four 'strongly disagree'.

seemed to play a relevant part in the prevalent perception of feedback as a non-competitive tool.

### *7.5.1 Discussion: Peer competition in relation to departmental opportunities*

As the above findings outlined, perceptions of competition among several respondents were directed towards their peers. In particular, departmental opportunities where students inevitably compete with peers to obtain some kind of reward (e.g. a seat in the orchestra, the offer of a lunchtime concert, the opportunity for composers to have their compositions performed) seemed to promote a sense of comparison among students. While such opportunities are competitive per se, these are not curricular activities for MA students, who have agency to decide over their involvement; therefore, it might be questioned why MA students feel some pressure to take part in these. It might be the case that students are willing to gain relevant experience in relation to their *curriculum vitae*, potential future PhD studies or development of professional employability; as outlined by existing literature (Bennett, 2012; Crouzevialle & Butera, 2017), the selective mechanism of opportunities where only some students are successful creates a competence-based hierarchy among students that might affect their accessibility to working opportunities and status: 'Superiority over the other students is commonly represented as the key that opens the door to future high-profile employment opportunities and social prestige' (Crouzevialle & Butera, 2017, p. 74). Thus, awareness of the potential implications of opportunities such as taking part in auditioned ensembles or winning a 'call for scores' to be performed could prompt MA students to undertake competitive opportunities offered by the department beyond their curricular activities.

### *7.5.2 Discussion: Perception of performance opportunities*

The above findings indicated that several respondents considered extra-curricular performance opportunities as particularly competitive. This is not surprising and as mentioned in the previous section corroborates research outlining not only the high competitiveness of careers in music performance (Bartleet et al., 2019; Bennett & Burnard, 2016) but also the relevance of extra-curricular activities to develop a higher



level of employability (López-Iñiguez & Bennett, 2021). In this context, students' competition for practice rooms, as highlighted by three respondents (section 7.5), might be directly linked to their commitment to performance opportunities and perceptions of equality; indeed, while all students can access practice rooms, additional rooms are available to students who play non-portable instruments (e.g. piano, organ, drums). This policy is likely to be effective in compensating potential inequalities related to accessibility – keyboard players, for example, might not have access to their instrument in their accommodation – but other considerations must be addressed. For example, the departmental pianos largely outnumber the organs and harpsichords, hence organ and harpsichord students have more practical limitations which could affect their perceptions of competition. Likewise, aside from the two concert halls, which are not bookable by students unless they have a forthcoming recital, only four practice rooms have grand pianos, and the competition to access rooms with the best pianos may be intense among first-study pianists, as P3\_MA suggested (see findings in 7.5). This could indicate that students are aware of the potential implications of getting the best opportunities for their future, which might contribute to fostering their perceptions of competition towards peers in the department.

### *7.5.3 Discussion: Competition related to assessments, marks and feedback*

Several MA respondents regarded assessments as inherently competitive. Assessments involving some kind of exposure to peers seemed to put pressure among a number of respondents, and triggered competitive feelings; indeed, unlike written assessments, students do not get the opportunity to keep their performance private during in-class performance presentations and instrumental/vocal recitals, which might promote direct comparison. On the other hand, those six students who experienced high feelings of competition in relation to written assessments (see section 7.5), did not provide any further explanation. It might be questioned, though, whether written assessments could be stressful, particularly for students who do not have English as their first language, and such possibility would align with research indicating the difficulties faced by international students in both developing high language standards

in English-speaking countries (Kuo, 2011) and writing papers in English (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Surprisingly, findings highlighted that summative assessments were not perceived as more competitive than formative ones; this does not align with studies identifying summative assessments as more stressful (Cachia et al., 2018), but might indicate that respondents' motivation to improve was applied to assessments regardless of the implications for their final degree classification.

Predictably, findings revealed that several respondents regarded marks as having a considerable influence on their perceptions of competition. Unlike written feedback that was generally perceived as more neutral due to its individuality, the perception of marks among several respondents corroborated literature addressing marks as promoting 'anxiety, [...], social comparison, as well as a fear of failure' (Chamberlin et al., 2018, p. 11). In particular, sharing marks with peers seemed to prompt social comparison with those who undertook the same assessment. Interestingly, while the departmental policy regarding marks is to share these individually with students, only a small number of respondents kept their marks private in order to avoid comparison. Considering that most respondents found out their peers' marks through conversations, some of them might have felt compelled to share their marks in social contexts where other peers – perhaps those who had good results – openly talked and asked about marks. This would create an inconvenient situation where students who want to keep their mark to themselves feel unable to do so, which could explain the negative perception of competition arising from mark sharing experienced by some respondents. On the other hand, mark sharing might also have a positive impact on students' motivation; for some respondents, receiving a lower mark turned into a motivation to produce higher quality work to match that of peers.

## **7.6 Aspects softening competition in the UoY Music**

### **Department**

This section presents MA students' perceptions of aspects that contributed to softening competition within the UoY Music Department. Three respondents felt that getting older helped them feel more mature and less focussed on 'other people's grades' (P26\_MA), and seven respondents reported having a supportive relationship

with peers as something that dampened their feelings of competition in the department: 'My classmates always help each other, we don't think of each other as competitors' (P3\_MA). A positive view of peers was endorsed by 15 respondents, who regarded peers as a source of support and deemed due to closeness and trustworthiness. Interestingly, P3\_MA furthered their views by detailing how cultural elements endorsed a supportive peer community among Chinese students:

Most of my classmates are not English speakers and they can understand the difficulties of the language. We are all proud of each other's good achievements. [...]. I think it has to do with culture because our culture tells us that when you leave your country, you should help each other out with other Chinese [peers].

On the other hand, three respondents disagreed with such perspective on closeness of peer relationship and indicated that limited to no interaction with peers was more determining in softening perceptions of competition in the department.

Some respondents (n=7) felt that the opportunities offered by the department did not encourage competition; for some of them, ensemble participation, performance opportunities and student-led activities were perceived as an 'opportunity for self-realization' (P11\_MA) rather than being competition-triggering, while others felt that the circumstances where students might be competing with each other in the department were limited. In particular, the 'ample ability for everyone to be involved [in departmental opportunities]' (P18\_MA) and the lack of 'many musical competitions in the department' (P9\_MA) contributed to make the departmental atmosphere appear non-competitive to these respondents.

Eight respondents found that departmental policies like anonymity and individual mark sharing also played a part in reducing the chances of peer comparison, and seven students praised the positive and inclusive departmental atmosphere, with one of them believing that 'the sense of competition is just assumed by students, not created [...] as a competition by the Music department' (P13\_MA). Likewise, P2 felt that staff did not encourage students to 'focus on marks or degree classification', and other students (n=3) expressed positive opinions about the attitude of the academic staff, who actively promoted collaborative behaviours and discouraged competition;

P3\_MA, for example, claimed that 'At the first MA [...] meeting, the tutor said that we should be a cooperative relationship and hoped that we could help each other. So, I think it helps me to be less competitive'. Such a generally positive view of the academic staff was confirmed by 16 students who viewed their academic supervisor as someone they could talk to about their feelings of competition. Furthermore, for a few respondents (n=5), the type of MA programme they were enrolled on was not competitive, and while only two of them provided further details, these students linked such lack of competition to its non-performance-based nature (P2\_MA) as well as the collaborative learning methods proposed within classes (P25\_MA).

One last aspect that helped respondents to soften their perceptions of competition within the department was the use of coping strategies. For six respondents, immersing themselves into preparation for situations that required them to engage with some kind of competition (e.g. auditions, assessments) was an effective way to deal with feelings of competition. P30\_MA, for example, conceptualised competition as 'natural selection, survival of the fittest', which motivated them to 'study harder than before' to achieve their intended outcome. Differently, other respondents (n=11) dealt with competition through strategies like positive self-talk, relaxation and talking with close friends. Lastly, seven respondents reported making use of avoidance strategies to deal with competitive feelings: some students (n=4) detached themselves from competition through avoiding or limiting close contact with 'overly ambitious people' (P3), and some shied away from competition (n=4) by not taking part in competitive opportunities, for example 'large performance competitions' (P1\_MA). One of these respondents, P2\_MA, reported throughout the questionnaire to avoid engaging with both excessively competitive opportunities and peers regarded as particularly competitive.

### *7.6.1 Discussion: The role of peers in reducing perceptions of competition*

Findings suggested that for some students the relationship with their peers contributed to effectively reduce their feelings of competition within the department. For some respondents, their age may have helped them view competition from a mature perspective; they did not feel compelled to compare themselves with their peers. These students may have experienced competition related to marks or performances during their undergraduate studies, and this could have encouraged

them to switch their focus from peers' achievements to their own. On the other hand, social interactions might represent situations where competition is likely to arise for some students; therefore, limiting contact with peers might be an effective way for them to reduce the likelihood of engaging with competitive situations.

Aspects linked to the specificities of MA courses might have contributed to dampen peer competition among respondents; while these will be discussed in greater detail in section 7.7.1, it could be speculated that the lack of exposure connected to musical performance encouraged most respondents to establish supportive, non-competitive relationships with their peers. This explanation seems to support existing literature highlighting the high competitiveness of performance-based environments (Miksza, et al., 2021; Papageorgi et al., 2010), as findings from this questionnaire may indicate that competitive feelings among peers decrease in non-performance oriented environments.

Lastly, the perception of peers as a source of support rather than competitors might also have to do with the specific demographic characteristics of the majority of the respondents: most of them were international students (67%) and, as literature suggests, they are likely to find themselves dealing with challenges such as adaptation to a new academic system of teaching, learning, and assessing (Wang, 2018). The shared discomfort produced by being in a challenging situation could encourage them to establish closer connections and support each other rather than competing for opportunities, marks and achievements. Furthermore, this might be particularly the case for students coming from collectivist Asian cultures, as suggested by P3\_MA.

Such perception of peers among taught MA students might be of interest for staff members and other educators; indeed, if a supportive relationship with peers effectively reduces perceptions of competition among taught MA Music students, it would be relevant to look into how staff members and students themselves may promote departmental opportunities or events (e.g. workshops, social events, music collaborative opportunities) that develop peer support across all cohorts of students.

### *7.6.2 Discussion: Departmental policies and opportunities*

Findings revealed that a number of respondents regarded some opportunities and departmental policies as successful in both reducing competitive feelings and promoting collaboration and self-realisation. This perspective might have to do with

these students' position within the department; MA students are not required to take part in ensembles or attend a predetermined number of concerts per term, and have agency to decide whether to get involved in these opportunities or not. Therefore, those who take part in ensembles or other departmental groups are likely to be self-motivated to do so and, consequently, may avoid getting involved in situations where they might engage with detrimental feelings of competition.

Departmental policies were also deemed as effective in limiting opportunities for students to compete; in particular, students perceived that anonymity and individual mark sharing allowed students to keep their achievements private to them and decide whether to share with their peers or not. Moreover, staff orientation towards promoting collaboration instead of competition – an attitude that had favourable response from several students – also played a part in the perceptions of the UoY Music Department as an inclusive environment where various MA students did not feel pushed to engage with competition.

### *7.6.3 Discussion: Coping strategies*

The majority of respondents (n=24) made use of some type of coping strategies to deal with the impact of competition. The high number of respondents reporting making use of coping strategies might suggest that this category of students is well-equipped to deal with competition-related challenges; indeed, MA students have previous experience in higher education which might have strengthened their ability to cope with competition. However, it should be noted that most respondents were undertaking a taught MA programme in a foreign country and were already facing daily challenges related to this status. In these circumstances, students were by some means compelled to deal with these challenges, and their coping skills might be easily transferred to the competition domain. In other words, MA students might be able to effectively apply the same coping strategies to feelings of competition that they had used to cope with the challenges of living and studying abroad. Therefore, it could be interesting to investigate with a larger sample of international MA students what the implications of studying abroad might be on these students' ability to deal with other challenges they might find within their studies; for example, competition with their peers, competition for the best opportunities, and competition for gaining visibility.

## **7.7 Perceptions of competition in relation to previous undergraduate studies and studying abroad**

Findings concerning respondents' perceptions of competition in relation to previous studies and experiences will now be discussed. Eight respondents felt that the level of competition experienced during their undergraduate studies was higher than that experienced within their MA. For some of them (n=3), the pressure stemmed from their undergraduate course being performance-oriented, to the point that P15\_MA felt relieved about putting performance aside: 'My mental health improved when I withdrew from competitive music making in my undergraduate degree'. However, only three respondents out of eight detailed whether their perception of competition during their undergraduate study was prompted by students or staff; P2\_MA, who studied their BA in the UoY Music Department, reported that 'only students' triggered mark comparisons between peers, and they 'haven't heard any staff, focus on marks or degree classifications'. Conversely, P7\_MA and P22\_MA, who attended undergraduate courses elsewhere, stated that on some occasions during their BA degree their teachers would compare students, fostering feelings of competition that negatively impacted students' confidence.

While some respondents' perception of their MA was that of a course oriented towards personal development which was also feedback-focussed (n=3), two students experienced a higher level of competition within their MA compared to their previous studies, and one of them (P17\_MA) perceived their peers as particularly competitive with each other. One respondent regarded competition during the MA as multifaceted, for it embraced 'more aspects and more complexities' (P13\_MA) but, unfortunately, they did not provide further detail.

In consideration of the high percentage of international students who studied their undergraduate programme in a country outside the UK (67%), it is not surprising that some of them compared their experience of UK higher education with that of their home country. Five students regarded the UK higher education system as less competitive; P7\_MA, for example, believed that their UK vocal teacher's habit to differentiate repertoire among their students inhibited comparison, while one other respondent acknowledged the existence of cultural differences, though they were

unsure whether these might determine different perceptions of competition among students:

I think competitiveness is related to an individual's personality, not different from which country you come from. If I had to say something different, I would think that British tutors would be less likely to make direct comparisons in front of students. But Chinese tutors prefer to compare me directly with others in front of me. That is, British teachers may focus more on individual development than on team development [...]. Chinese teachers may prefer that all their students excel at the same level. In general, there are some cultural differences. That is, the Chinese like to evaluate the success of a teacher in a group. If you have a good student, that student is probably good. But if you have a group of good students, that proves you're a good teacher (P3\_MA).

Several international students seemed to experience negative feelings in relation to studying and being assessed in their second language. In particular, eight of them expressed stress, lack of confidence, frustration and worries at not being able to fully understand and express themselves. One respondent felt patronised by the staff:

They expect you to speak and write the language at the high level of expectation but at the end when it comes with the not good evaluation result, they calm you down by saying that this is okay because it's not your first language. It just doesn't help and somehow almost felt like an insult (P13\_MA).

On the other hand, P11\_MA felt that linguistic improvement was 'my responsibility' and attending an English-taught MA course did not impact their feelings of competition with their English native peers.

### *7.7.1 Discussion: Competition in previous undergraduate studies*

Findings highlighted a range of responses in relation to students' previous experiences of competition in higher education. Respondents had varied educational backgrounds



and many of them attended their undergraduate studies in countries other than the UK, therefore it is not possible to determine which aspects contributed to such diverse views. However, undergraduate students are likely to have had time to develop closer relationships with each other during a three-year course; conversely, postgraduate students are less likely to get involved in departmental social life (Humphrey & McCarthy, 1999). Furthermore, the diversification of the MA courses allowed students to choose the area of musical study that was more tailored to their needs and to disengage with other areas they might find too competitive; as findings in section 7.5 outlined, performance assessments and opportunities were perceived as particularly competitive by several respondents; at least one student (P2\_MA) regarded their MA course as non-competitive thanks to its non-performance based curricular orientation.

On the other hand, those few students who regarded their MA as more competitive than their bachelor degree referred to competitive peers but also to their difficulties in getting good results as the main reasons for such perception. The progressive internationalisation of UK universities (Ploner, 2018) has posed new challenges in relation to international students' academic adjustments and achievement; Rienties et al. (2012) found international students' integration with academic life to be particularly challenging, which resulted in these students needing more time to obtain academic results that are comparable to those of home students. As MAs in the UK are generally one-year courses, students may lack sufficient time to improve their academic performance; therefore, respondents' perceptions of their MA as more competitive than their undergraduate course might have to do with the difficulties to compete for higher academic achievements, which seem to be more attainable for home students.

### *7.7.2 Discussion: Competition in foreign higher education systems*

Findings revealed that while some students regarded the UK higher education system as less competitive than the one experienced in their home countries, none of the respondents argued the opposite. Cultural and institutional differences are likely to influence how competition is perceived within different educational systems; the possible orientation of the UoY Music Department staff and instrumental/vocal teachers to promote a non-comparative culture might be mirrored in their educational choices (e.g. to differentiate repertoire, as suggested by P7\_MA). Nonetheless,

students who had been exposed to open comparisons made by former teachers as a driver for improvement may feel less subjected to competition in the UK educational system. Of course, it could also be the case that for those students who were the ones excelling during their BA degrees, being compared as the preferential category might have boosted their confidence yet further.

While current research revealed that cultural aspects impact on international students' responses to educational differences (Heng, 2018; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020), it is unlikely that such responses are entirely culturally determined (Gu, 2009) and other situational factors should be considered. For example, the findings above outlined that several students had a strong emotional response to studying in their second language. As outlined in Chapter 6, the extra pressure stemming from studying and operating in a second language is likely to have a negative impact on international students' adaptation and integration with the culture of the hosting country (Akanwa, 2015; Kuo, 2011; Meng, et al., 2021), as demonstrated by several studies that investigated the emotional burden associated with language barriers among higher education students (Brown, 2009; Mori, 2011; Yu & Moskal, 2018; Wilczewski & Alon, 2022).

While recent reports demonstrate that the number of international – and particularly Chinese – students in UK higher education institutions has been rapidly increasing (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018), existing policies may not necessarily be tailored to support international students in their adaptation and integration process. Thus, it would be beneficial to gain further insight into the institutional approaches to the challenges experienced by international students, and to empower an increasingly positive response to the challenges faced by both staff and students in a context of progressive internationalisation of higher education.

## **7.8 Relationship between perceptions of competition and wellbeing**

Throughout the questionnaire two thirds of students (n=20) agreed that feelings of competition might influence individuals' mental wellbeing. Respondents' perceptions of their mental health were investigated through a 7-point Likert scale, whose statements are presented below (Table 7.3). All questions but two (statements 4 and 6) were derived from a large survey distributed to students across multiple UK

universities to gain insight into students' mental health status (Pereira et al., 2018). Statements 4 and 6 were added to gather data about potential correlation between respondents' mental health and their MA programme. 25 respondents completed this Likert scale. Please see Appendix I for a graphical representation of respondents' answers to each statement.

*Table 7.3: Likert scale statements investigating MA Music students' assessment of their own mental health*

<b>Statement Number</b>	<b>Item</b>
1	'In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition'
2	'I developed a mental health condition while at university'
3	'I often feel isolated'
4	'I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my instrument/voice'
5	'I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help'
6	'I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my academic assessments'
7	'I often feel worried or anxious'

Answers to the Likert scale statements revealed that most respondents reported not having received a mental health diagnosis (statement 1) nor having developed any mental health condition in response to their higher education studies (statement 2)<sup>32</sup>. No strong orientation among respondents could be observed for the other statements: for example, 11 respondents agreed to various extents to statement 5 ('I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help') and 12 disagreed, while 12 agreed with statement 6 ('I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my academic assessments' and 11 disagreed.

Respondents' perceptions of competition and mental wellbeing were further revealed through their responses to open questions; seven students believed the influence of competition on mental health to be twofold as competition can be used to 'motivate you and improve' (P2\_MA) and 'enhance creativity' but also 'being not good

---

<sup>32</sup> In relation to statement 1, five respondents agreed to various extents while 19 disagreed, with a prevalence of respondents (n=10) answering 'strongly disagree' (Likert scale rating=1). In relation to statement 2, seven respondents agreed to various extents and 15 disagreed, again with a prevalence of respondents (n=8) answering 'strongly disagree'.

to [...] mental health' (P26\_MA), while four respondents stated that other students' achievements would positively motivate them to learn and improve. P4\_MA, for example, stated that 'through competition, I can find others' merit, then I can learn from them'. Some respondents (n=4) reported developing further skills and abilities thanks to competition, while others described competition as useful tool to develop resilience (P2\_MA), ambition (P3\_MA), and one respondent stated that they tried to respond constructively to criticism that might arise from feedback in explicitly competitive situations: 'I try to focus on the positive things I have been told by tutors etc. and learn from the criticisms they make so that I continue to learn and improve' (P17\_MA).

On the other hand, some negative effects of competitive feelings on mental health were acknowledged by more respondents: emotions such as pressure, resentment, stress and discomfort were felt by eight students, and the same number of respondents also associated competition with a feeling of lack of confidence. For example, P28\_MA, who selected 'agree' to statements 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 reported in Table 7.3, commented: '[I] got quite poorly worrying about being judged and not being good enough compared to [others]'. P3\_MA, furthermore, reacted to the insecurity created by competition with a lack of self-compassion:

Personally, I find it easy to sink into anxiety and insecurity. While this pressure and ambition may have helped [others to] improve, I found the process too painful. For example, I would become so emotionally unstable that I would even hate myself.

Inadequacy in competitive situations was perceived by three respondents: P18\_MA, for example, often felt 'inferior' in comparison with their peers and, with regard to musical performance, P14\_MA tended to get 'very nervous and question if I was good enough to compete in the first place'. Two students acknowledged performances as competitive situations and reported being concerned about the audience response while performing: 'When performing in public, I'd wonder if the audience felt I was good enough' (P14\_MA).

Remarkably, one student (P17\_MA) whose answers to statement 4 of the Table 7.3 suggested a relationship between their mental health and their performing

capabilities (see Appendix I for full responses), claimed that competition made them 'feel uncomfortable' and added: 'I like being in ensembles and playing in a team, I am afraid of pushing myself forward and the competition that then ensues – this is something that really annoys me about myself!!'. Three other students, instead, felt that the decrease of competition experienced in the department corresponded to improved mental wellbeing and self-confidence: 'The less competitive atmosphere at York has fostered a less competitive, more assured attitude to my music making' (P23\_MA). On the other hand, P26\_MA felt that members of the staff 'don't really understand how hard it could be to suffer from mental health issues', and claimed that better support from 'supervisor or module tutors' would be beneficial.

### *7.8.1 Discussion: Responses to mental wellbeing issues arising from competition*

Findings seemed to highlight that some MA students acknowledged that competition might act as an incentive for ambition, hard work and motivation – as substantiated also by sports literature (Clancy et al., 2016) – as well as for creativity and learning from peers. On the other hand, the number of respondents who focussed on the potential negative effects of competition on mental wellbeing was higher and answers addressing such negative impact were more detailed.

Consistently with findings from undergraduate and PhD respondents in this research, perceptions of competition in the department seemed to produce stress and impacted on some students' confidence. It might be considered, however, whether such impact might stem from different circumstances as compared to that experienced by other students. Language-related issues, for example (section 7.7), were reported to impact on international students' feelings of competition and it cannot be excluded that this might affect their wellbeing. Furthermore, existing research (Tsai, et al., 2021) pointed out that international students are less likely to make use of mental health services for cultural and situational reasons (e.g. social stigma towards counselling, lack of opportunity to receive counselling in their native language), which might worsen both their wellbeing and their ability to cope with competition-related negative effects.

While only a small number of MA respondents were enrolled on performance-based courses (n=6), two students referred to feelings that can be linked to Music Performance Anxiety, defined as ‘the experience of marked and persistent anxious apprehension related to musical performance’ (Kenny, 2009, p. 433). In particular, their apprehension related to the audience response to their performances seemed to impact negatively on their wellbeing.

Existing studies on mental health in higher education have mainly focussed on undergraduate students’ experience, while the equivalent research for postgraduate students is sparse (Hazell et al., 2020), and there is no large-scale study to date regarding the specific effects that competition might have on postgraduate music students’ mental health. While this research sample is not large enough to generalise findings, the demographic characteristics of these students make this group significantly different from their undergraduate counterpart, namely the other students who are enrolled in taught-courses: most taught-MA respondents are international students who had previous experience of higher education, are enrolled on music specialised programmes (e.g. education-based, performance-based, musicology-based), and their age range is slightly more varied. Consequently, the relationship between their perceptions of competition and wellbeing is likely to depend on circumstances connected to such demographic characteristics, including previous experiences in higher education, cultural and social backgrounds and individual motivation to pursue a taught MA in the UK. Therefore, while further studies on how postgraduate music students’ wellbeing might be affected by perceptions of competition would certainly prove beneficial for institutions, these should be considerate of the specific characteristics that distinguish this group of students.

## **7.9 Perceptions of competition within the music industry**

Data analysis revealed that some respondents associated career prospects with feelings of competition. Specifically, eight students considered the music industry as extremely competitive, though they provided different reasons for such level of competition. Five students believed that the high number of individuals who ‘might be going for the same opportunity’ (P14\_MA) made musical careers particularly competitive and selective. Consequently, they

seemed to think that gaining a competitive advantage towards other competitors would enhance their employability chances; P16\_MA, for example, regarded the necessity to 'stand out as much as possible' as essential to achieve desired professional outcomes. Conversely, two respondents worried that they were not skilled enough to gain any advantage over potential competitors, particularly in the performance industry; P18\_MA stated: 'I don't expect to ever be a high enough level of player to be competing musically'.

Four students considered the lack of job opportunities as another potential reason for the high competitiveness of the music industry, while at least one respondent was worried that the situation resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic represented an additional factor of uncertainty: 'I think competition in the music sector might be even higher now as we don't know what's going to happen with venues opening/shutting down' (P17\_MA). While not all MA students might be looking for professional careers in the UK, as suggested by P30\_MA, and their perceptions of the competitiveness of the job market might therefore be different, one respondent (P2\_MA) mentioned the existence of some form of indirect competition which might apply across multiple industries and operate beyond the level of skill development:

The whole music industry is to do with working with other people; you can receive lots of opportunities by word-of-mouth and by making good impressions on others. So you are definitely competing with other musicians (even indirectly, through your reputation/impression/manner) all the time. I think it prompts you to be grounded, humble and secure in your achievements and resilient (P2\_MA).

In this regard, competition for professional prospects seems to be connected to personal presentation, as a positive impression could enhance individuals' chances to gain the best opportunities. Lastly, only one student (P15\_MA) made a comment on the position of the department towards competition and the music industry:

I think that the Music department runs on a fairly conservative and traditional model which fosters competition simply as a result of the nature of the profession and industry. This is avoidable. A music department fit for the future would be doing more to change this.

Such view seemed to suggest that the UoY Music Department's ethos towards competition was aligned with the perception of the music industry as inherently competitive; however, the department possessed agency to change its ethos.

### *7.9.1 Discussion: Competition in the music industry and employability skills*

The perception of the music industry as a highly competitive one was shared by several respondents. While most of them did not detail whether they regarded one particular branch of the music industry as more competitive than others, such status was recognised within the musical performance career by a few students who felt insufficiently skilled to pursue this career. Performance students' tendency to put a strong emphasis on practice has been well documented by literature (MacNamara et al., 2008), but recent studies suggested that such emphasis might result in the underestimation of 'employability development or career development learning' (López-Iñiguez & Bennett, 2021, p. 135); indeed, most respondents envisaged the shortage of opportunities within the music industry and the high number of aspiring professional musicians as barriers but did not mention the opportunity to develop different career plans or other employability skills beyond hours devoted to practising. Only one student seemed to conceive the development of professional competitiveness also in terms of self-presentation, which is supported by studies pointing out that self-presentation skills might enhance highly qualified individuals' perceived employability (Wittekind et al., 2010).

Some implications are likely to arise from these findings. It might be questioned, in particular, whether the a focus on employability skills and other career plans applies especially to students who would consider a career in musical performance or includes other categories of music students.



Furthermore, respondents' answers did not shed light on careers-related provision of the department and the broader institution as only one student made a comment in this regard; it is therefore unclear whether students feel that the department is not sufficiently committed to prepare them for their professional careers or whether they are not thinking broadly enough about their future careers. Therefore, it could be relevant to investigate whether the gap between employability development and the job market requirements (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020) corroborates the pedagogical philosophy of some musical institutions that might prioritise students' musical practice over the development of other employability skills.

## **7.10 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the perceptions of competition among MA students from the UoY Music Department. The questionnaire was distributed to all MA students and 33 students completed the questionnaire.

Some degree of competition within the UoY Music Department was experienced by respondents particularly in relation to their peers; for example, departmental opportunities and competition for practice rooms were mentioned as circumstances where students might find themselves competing with each other. Furthermore, most respondents disclosed experiencing peer competition with regard to assessments and marks. The substantial number of respondents who referred to performance and oral presentations as particularly competitive (section 7.5) could indicate that feelings of competition among these students increased when they were more visible and exposed to their peers. Conversely, other students found written assignments particularly competitive, though it could be questioned whether such perception had to do with the extra challenge that most respondents, being non-English native, had to face in that context.

On the other hand, several factors contributed to reduce the degree of competition experienced by students. The relationship with their peers was regarded by some students as mainly supportive, while for other respondents it was actually the lack of socialisation that prevented competitive feelings from arising. MA courses are generally one year long (two for part-time students) and students can find themselves

without much time to build up a strong community of peer relationships, even though existing research demonstrates peer support among postgraduate students to be relevant for their social and academic integration (Byl et al., 2018). Moreover, the international profile and more varied age range of most MA courses in the UoY Music Department contributes to create a heterogeneous group of students with potentially different post-MA aims, which might also reduce the likelihood of developing competitive feelings among students. Other aspects including support from academic supervisor, use of coping strategies, departmental policy of anonymity in relation to the release of marks to students, as well as the staff's attitude to promote collaboration between students contributed to soften perceptions of competition among some respondents.

Several students compared their experiences as MA students with their undergraduate studies. Some of them regarded their undergraduate course as more competitive than their MA, particularly because of the emphasis put on performance and academic excellence by their peers. However, other respondents struggled more with competitive feelings during their MA, particularly because of the challenges related to writing and studying in their second language. Interestingly, while the challenges of being non-English native were acknowledged by most of the international students, some of them regarded the UK higher education system as less competitive than the one they experienced in their own country. For privacy reasons, students were not asked to disclose their nationality, but it is reasonably safe to assume that cultural differences might partially explain such differences. Furthermore, a positive perception of the UoY Music Department staff as promoters of a collaborative approach among students might also contribute to explain these differences.

Consistently with findings from other categories of students, MA respondents also acknowledged competition as an aspect that could influence their mental wellbeing. Most of them identified competition as something that could impact negatively on individuals' mental wellbeing, though fewer respondents reported feeling personally motivated and energised by their feelings of competition. Most existing research on the mental health of students in higher education has focussed primarily on undergraduate students, with postgraduate taught students being under-represented. As stated above (section 7.7.2), their steadily increasing number and

diversity of students' experiences, musical backgrounds and future aims warrants further large-scale research specifically tailored to this category of students. Furthermore, while only one student who completed this questionnaire occasionally referred to their experience as a mature student who returned to education after many years, it could be interesting to investigate how perceptions of competition among these students could differ from those held by students who started their masters in the immediate years following their undergraduate degree.

Findings from this questionnaire demonstrated that most students were aligned in regarding musical professional careers as competitive and performance careers were perceived as particularly demanding. While these respondents were likely not only to have different career aspirations, but also to look at job markets outside the UK, it still might be relevant to investigate how their MA experience in higher music education prepares them for competition in their professional future; indeed, while one of the most relevant aims of higher education is to prepare students for their professional future, institutions are likely to face new challenges in achieving that within an increasingly diverse range of students. Therefore, further investigations into these students' perceptions of competition within their music department and in relation to their future careers would provide institutions with relevant information that might contribute to inform their educational approach.

# **Chapter 8: Instrumental and vocal teachers’ perspectives on students’ perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department**

## **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter investigates the perspectives of 14 instrumental and vocal teachers (IVTs) employed by the University of York Music Department in relation to students’ perceptions of competition within the same department. The findings are presented in relation to five major themes: teachers’ conceptualisations of competition, teachers’ views of aspects that foster or soften competition within the UoY Music Department, teachers’ perceptions of the departmental culture in relation to competition, teachers’ support to students, and teachers’ perceptions of competitiveness in the music industry. While the aim of this study was to gather an understanding of IVTs’ perspective of competition within the UoY Music Department, some participants situated their answers within the broader context of their institutional teaching work, which also includes other universities, conservatoires and schools (see section 8.3). Therefore, the interviews presented the opportunity to consider teachers’ views on competition with reference to diverse institutional settings.

## **8.2 Procedure**

Online interviews using Zoom were used as methods of data collection for 12 participants. One further participant requested an email interview and one other requested a telephone interview; both these were conducted using the same questions as the interview schedule.

Due to the overarching sequencing of the project’s research phases, some of the interview questions were informed by students’ responses to the questionnaires while others were created in relation to existing literature on music competition, personal experience and awareness of the research context. Following a pilot

interview, some questions were removed, added, or adjusted to gather more the most appropriate data<sup>33</sup>.

In October 2020, all instrumental and vocal teachers employed by the UoY Music Department at that time received an interview invitation email to take part in this research project which included an information sheet covering the project aims, data protection policy, anonymity, participants' rights and use of data. Initially, the request was sent by a departmental administrator to the mailing list of all IVTs; due to a low response rate, a second email was sent individually to each teacher one week later. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine how many teachers agreed to participate in relation to the total number of IVTs who received the invitation emails because it was subsequently discovered that the teachers' mailing list was not up to date at that time and included some teachers who were no longer working for the department.

The interviews were carried out between October and December 2020 and participants were required to complete a consent form in advance of the meeting. All participants were asked whether they would like to see the transcript of their interview before the start of the data analysis process. Those who requested the transcript were allowed two full weeks to check it and make any changes they wished; they were granted the possibility to extend the deadline, if needed. Participants were informed that in the case of no further communication from them within two weeks after receiving the transcript, the researcher would assume their approval. The link to the full data set is available in Appendix D.

### **8.3 Participants' demographics**

As mentioned above, 14 IVTs employed by the UoY Music Department took part in this interview study. Table 8.1 shows demographic details relating to the number of years working as instrumental or vocal teachers in the UoY Music Department at the time of the interviews:

---

<sup>33</sup> While an extensive account of the methodological aspects and procedures connected with the interview has been detailed in Chapter 4, section 4.3, a brief summary of the interview process has also been provided here to help readers contextualise this interview study.

*Table 8.1: Years spent working as instrumental or vocal teachers at the UoY Music Department*

	<b>Fewer than 5 years</b>	<b>5 years or more</b>	<b>10 years or more</b>	<b>20 years or more</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	3	7	2	2

As Table 8.1 shows, half of the participants (50%) had worked as instrumental or vocal teachers at the UoY Music Department for five years or more, 22% for fewer than five years, 14% for ten years or more, and the remaining 14% for 20 years or more. Table 8.2 presents the instrumental specialisation of each teacher, categorised within instrumental families (e.g. string instruments, keyboard instruments) rather than the specific instrument taught by each participant in order to support participant anonymity.

*Table 8.2: Participants' instrumental specialism*

	<b>Strings</b>	<b>Wind</b>	<b>Keyboard</b>	<b>Voice</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	3	2	5	4

Participants were asked to provide details regarding concurrent employment as IVTs in other institutions; their responses ranged from having no other employment as IVTs to being employed across multiple tertiary, secondary and primary-level institutions. To provide a clear overview of their employment contexts, Table 8.3 shows participants' responses as grouped across seven categories. For formatting purposes, the following abbreviations will be provided:

1. Conservatoire(s): CONS
2. University music department(s): UMD
3. Conservatoire(s) and university music department(s): CONS + UMD
4. Primary or secondary school: SCH
5. University music department(s) and primary or secondary school: UMD + SCH
6. University music department(s), conservatoire(s) and primary or secondary school: UMD + CONS + SCH

## 7. No other employment: NOE

*Table 8.3: Participants' employment as IVTs in other institutions*

	CONS	UMD	CONS + UMD	SCH	UMD + SCH	UMD + CONS + SCH	NOE
<b>Number of participants</b>	1	3	3	2	2	1	2

Table 8.3 shows that participants worked at a variety of different institutions. The majority were concurrently employed in other tertiary-level institutions, with one of them employed in conservatoire(s) (7%), others in university music department(s) (21%) or both (21%). Some respondents had employments in primary or secondary music schools; for two of them (14%) this was their only other job as an IVT beyond the UoY Music Department, but two others (14%) also worked in a university music department and one (7%) had employments in schools, university music department(s) and conservatoire(s). Two respondents (14%) reported having no other employment as an IVT. This categorisation did not take into account any private teaching that participants might have been carrying out as the perceptions of competition of students who learn music privately were beyond the scope of this research.

## **8.4 IVTs' conceptualisations and attitudes towards competition**

### *8.4.1 Teachers' twofold view of competition*

All teachers regarded aspects of competition to be part of tertiary-level institutions and the majority (n=9) acknowledged competition as a twofold factor that included both motivating aspects and damaging behaviours. The motivating aspect of competition was perceived as healthy when students 'sniff each other to see what [they] can learn or pinch ideas from each other' (P9\_IVTs). Often, these perceptions showed close association with the visibility of performance. P1\_IVTs, for example, stated:

They hear someone playing something in a final recital when they're in their first year and they're like 'I want to play that piece!' Blow me down, you know! Two terms later this same person that I'm thinking 'they'll never

reach that', they're able to play it! Because they're so determined to achieve that standard.

However, beyond the motivating aspects, participants also believed that competition might be experienced as unhealthy by students in the form of heavy criticism of students' performances by members of academic staff (n=2), students' desire to prevail over their peers rather than learning from them (n=4) and teachers engaging in competitive behaviours (n=4). Further details on this last point will be provided in section 8.4.3. Conversely, two teachers further identified a lack of peer competition as potentially misleading, for students might develop an unrealistic understanding of their own musical capabilities in non-competitive circumstances: 'sometimes with the universities [...] you might be the only viola player so you are asked to play in everything, but you can be absolutely appalling, but you think you're great because you're asked to play' (P2\_IVTs).

#### *8.4.2 Teachers' views on the genesis of competitive attitudes*

Participants held different views regarding the genesis of competitive attitudes among students. Some teachers (n=5) believed that external judgement (for example, from peers and/or staff and IVTs) may elicit competition. For example, P8\_IVTs claimed: 'It's inevitable because it's part of the judgement. [...] And so, being judged also sets some sort of comparison'. However, four teachers also included elements of self-constructed competition within the genesis of competitive feelings among students. P8\_IVTs, for example regarded it as 'inevitable' that students 'compare [themselves] with [their] own cohort, with [their] year group', while P14\_IVTs stated:

It's also about the feeling that there might be some competitive element so that they want to change their game plan as a musician and as a performer in order to satisfy this external idea that they've put out, 'this is a competitive element', so that they're actually having to change something intrinsically in their musical communication presentation, which will influence them, rather than trusting and developing the essential product of themselves as the performer. They will deliberately disregard that and hook up to another element in order to satisfy this thing, which of course,



in my mind, further alienates them from the identification of their own music making.

Elements of competition within musical performance were also conceptualised as self-constructed by P7\_IVTs, whose view seems to corroborate P14\_IVTs:

You wish that performer the very best and you only want to hear them playing well, you don't want to hear them 'oh, I guess they messed up that shift'. You're not wishing that to happen to anyone but when [you're the performer] it's very easy to imagine that people are taking those negative things in your playing that you feel and feeding off that.

These participants seemed to identify in external judgement and self-constructed elements of competition the roots of students' competitive attitudes; however, P14\_IVTs also suggested that students may actively orient their perception of the surrounding culture towards a competitive one, which inevitably influences both their own attitudes towards that culture and the degree to which they will be likely to engage in competitive behaviours.

#### *8.4.2.1 Past experiences and cultural backgrounds*

The data analysis revealed that six participants thought that competition among UoY Music students was likely to be a product of students' past experiences. In particular, students who obtained high marks in music during secondary school may now be comparing themselves with higher-achieving peers. In this regard, P4\_IVTs claimed:

They've come from a very small pond where they've been a very big fish and been encouraged all along, which is terrific [...] but then what people find is they're coming into this very big pond where there's a lot of talent [...]. And when you drop that into a big pond it gets lost, it gets dispersed.

The role of past experiences in shaping students' feelings of competition was acknowledged by several teachers particularly with regard to international students. Six teachers believed that early exposure to musical contests and a competitive

cultural atmosphere in their home country may lead international students to experience competition as a driving force, perhaps more than for home students: 'Sometimes, perhaps from countries where there is more sense of pressure and competition, where perhaps there's an older tradition of teaching in what we know as the master-apprentice style, [...] things are skewed to the competitive side' (P1\_IVTs). As an example of the high expectations they have for themselves, P11\_IVTs noticed that international students appeared more concerned to achieve other qualifications beyond their university degree (e.g. performance diplomas) during their UK studies as compared to home students who tended to focus more on the degree itself. Three participants considered how students' competitiveness could be shaped by leaving their home country to study elsewhere. P1\_IVTs, for example, stated:

If someone is ready to come to a different country, speak a different language in order to do their degree, they have to have that outgoing pressure from within, in a way, of competing with themselves. I don't think you're going to get the students that prefer to stay at home. It could be competition with themselves, it could be competition with someone else they're in competition with, it might be to get away from competition with someone else.

Just one participant (P14\_IVTs) mentioned that language might act as a barrier to mutual understanding and 'free flowing discourse' around competition that might help teachers to gain insights into international students' perceptions of competition within the department.

#### *8.4.3 Teachers' attitudes to competition within their teaching*

A theme that emerged within the analysis related to how IVTs' attitudes to competition may influence music students' own perceptions. Three IVTs explicitly acknowledged that different attitudes have the potential to influence students' relationship with competition; for example, 'if [teachers and staff] thrive on competition themselves, it's almost inevitable that they will foster that within the department' (P1\_IVTs).

Interestingly, none of the 14 participants claimed to promote competition among their students and eight of them provided details of how they strove to avoid competition within their teaching, for example by being 'incredibly careful' about not making comparison between two students (P10\_IVTs). Likewise, a few participants (n=4) articulated their prioritising of a teaching style focussed on students' learning and musical development rather than on achievements; consequently, some competitions within the department were articulated by teachers as learning opportunities, not as competitions. For example, with regard to the concerto audition opportunity, P12\_IVTs stated:

It's something that from my teaching perspective I find really useful because it's a great opportunity to learn a concerto, it comes at a nice time in the second [undergraduate] year and from a teaching perspective quite a lot of people, particularly pianists, did come to York and they haven't played a concerto before. So it seems like a really good opportunity to go and learn a concerto, but then the students can get quite worried about the audition aspect, which I must say that it doesn't really matter to me, I just want them to learn the concerto!

Furthermore, P12\_IVTs added that receiving feedback from the staff makes the experience really beneficial for students: 'actually [name of a member of the panel] is so kind to give everyone such lovely, detailed feedback on the concerto audition and that is actually so valuable'.

A further perspective involved the development of students' self-belief. This was prioritised by P1\_IVTs: 'sometimes I'm encouraging [students] to develop their own self-belief, and maybe just risk a bit of competition because it's not unhealthy to have some sense of competition, as long as they've got some sense of self-belief to start with'. Four other teachers were aligned with P1\_IVTs in their commitment to nurture this sense; however, these teachers seemed to view such sense of self-belief as in contrast with competition rather than as an enabler of healthy competition, as suggested by P1\_IVTs above. P14\_IVTs, for example, stated that students who are 'aware of their own personal goal' may not 'see it necessarily kind of relevant to be competitive with other people and they just sort of quite happily do their own things'.

Consequently, it may be the case that in some cases teachers may not feel the necessity of promoting healthy self-belief among students who do not display particularly competitive attitudes.

#### *8.4.4 Discussion: IVTs' conceptualisations and attitudes towards competition*

Participants held a range of perspectives regarding how competitive feelings may influence students in higher music education. Remarkably, all participants believed competition to be part of tertiary-level music institution settings; this might be a reason why they decided to take part in this research. Most of them did not hold a strongly favourably or unfavourably-oriented position towards competition; instead, they tended to conceive it as both an incentive for improvement and as a promoter of potentially damaging behaviours. This twofold view is echoed by some literature discussing how the original goal of competition in music education as a tool of educational progress has progressively deteriorated and determined diminished levels of self-belief among music students (Austin, 1990). Similarly, Buyer (2005) regarded competitions intended as musical contests as an exceptional tool to motivate students but also acknowledged the risks connected to competitions becoming students' main drive to learn.

Findings revealed that several teachers believed competition could be a potentially motivating factor, a view that corroborates some literature acknowledging teachers' tendency to view competition as a drive for high levels of achievement (Opsal, 2013). However, existing research did not demonstrate a strong connection between competition and motivation in music education (Asmus, 1994) and viewed competition as a limited educational tool due to its promotion of an externally driven motivation (McPherson & Hendricks, 2010). Austin (1988) suggested that competitive situations may only motivate those students with a high level of self-esteem who believe they have good chances of winning.

Teachers tended to have different opinions in relation to the genesis of competition. Some of them believed that competition was mainly generated by the act of being evaluated by an external body which, in this case, may be the UoY Music Department. Consequently, this conceptualisation of competition considers

competitive feelings among students mainly as a product of opportunities provided by the institution where students are evaluated or judged (e.g. through assessments, auditions, final recitals); consequently, a high degree of responsibility could be placed on musical institutions in relation to the level of competitiveness experienced by their students. Nonetheless, it should be noted that all UK higher education institutions are required to comply with specific educational standards (Quality Assurance Agency, 2019), and the UK music education system has a solid tradition of assessing students, particularly in relation to performance (Fautley, 2010). Therefore, while departments may determine part of their educational offer (e.g. ensemble participation, extra-curricular audition opportunities), some curricular aspects that might produce competition among students are structurally part of higher education institution curricula. On the other hand, other teachers regarded competition as the product of pressure that students put on themselves. In particular, students' belief that performances are competitive per se may shape their musical understanding and, consequently, their musical communication, as suggested by P14\_IVTs (section 8.4.2.); thus, it could be argued that these students' identity as performers is shaped by their perceptions of competition as integral part of performance.

These two understandings of competition have been conceptualised by Kohn (1986), who distinguished between a self-determined drive to compete, namely self-constructed competition, or a desire to win in explicitly competitive situations, which was referred to as externally driven competition. While it may be argued that external and self-constructed elements of competition could coexist, they emphasise two different aspects of competition; the former presents opportunities created by institutions as particularly responsible for feelings of competition among students, while the latter emphasises students' responsibility towards the genesis of such feelings. This present research has uncovered further contributing factors, as discussed above, which add complexity to these views of competition.

Several teachers believed that the experience of transition into university as well as transition from their home country to the UK for international students may impact on students' feelings of competition. These views are validated by substantial evidence of experiences of increased feelings of pressure both among first-year undergraduate students (Bewick et al., 2010; Gall et al., 2000) and international students (Choi, 2012; Meng et al., 2021). However, while teachers articulated the type

of competition experienced by first-year undergraduates as mainly externally directed – particularly in the form of competing with peers of equal or higher abilities – international students were perceived by some participants (P11\_IVTs, for example) as having high demands on themselves and for their own achievements; thus, participants believed that these students’ sense of competition was self-directed. This perception seems to be in contrast with previous research indicating that, for example, Chinese students’ desire to prove themselves academically in another country may not be a prioritised motivation to undertake a degree abroad (Chao et al., 2017). It is worth noting, though, that demographic and geographic limitations of the above-mentioned study<sup>34</sup> did not allow for a generalisable representation of the Chinese university students abroad. Furthermore, in the present study, IVTs’ perspectives were specifically tailored to students’ approach to performance; therefore, while the department’s educational offer includes other musical domains (e.g. academic writing, musicology, composition, recording, etc.), the impact of other non-performance based opportunities on students might not be so readily available to IVTs.

In contrast with findings from the questionnaire distributed to MA students – as discussed in Chapter 7 (section 7.6.2) – most teachers did not seem to consider language as a potential barrier to students’ integration or mutual understanding. However, as P14\_IVTs’ answer suggested (section 8.4.2.1.), language-related challenges may impact on communication between teachers and international students, affecting teachers’ ability to understand international students’ adaptation issues and relationship with competition as compared to their English-native peers. Therefore, considering the increasing number of international students enrolling in UK tertiary-level institutions (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018), awareness of communication-related challenges is likely to be of relevance to institutions aiming to provide students with a satisfying educational experience.

Existing literature has focussed on the relationship between teachers’ attitudes and students’ achievement (Scrivner, 2009); fewer studies have focussed on how teachers might influence students’ attitudes to teaching and learning. Instrumental teacher participants in this study seemed to believe that their actions could impact

---

<sup>34</sup> This study by Chao et al. (2010), indeed, investigated the motivation for studying in the USA of a sample of 350 Chinese students from two North-American universities.

students' behaviours and attitudes towards competition, however, none of them reported encouraging their students to engage in competitive behaviours. Some of them regarded not making comparisons between their students as a core principle of their teaching; instead, they actively pursued an individualised teaching style aimed at developing each student's sense of self-belief. These teaching principles are likely to indicate awareness of the teachers' responsibility to influence the degree to which competition can proliferate in higher education contexts, particularly where competitive activities like music performances are one of the most prominent parts of the departmental offering.

## **8.5 Teachers' views of competition in the UoY Music Department**

### *8.5.1 Aspects fostering competition in the UoY Music Department*

Most teachers (n=10) regarded students' performance activities within the UoY Music Department as potentially competitive, and half of participants (n=7) believed that students may feel a greater sense of competition in relation to performance activities rather than academic ones, as the 'pressure of performing itself' was described as potentially 'nerve-wracking' (P11\_IVTs). Six teachers stated that performance activities in the department may encourage peer comparison: 'I think [the students] certainly experience the immediate competition of all their peers. They know each other in the department, so I think to one extent or another they all compare themselves to their immediate peers' (P13\_IVTs), though such consideration did not apply ubiquitously. Second-study singers/instrumentalists, for example, were perceived as less inclined to make comparisons than first-study students by ten teachers. The lack of 'pressure that there is for some to succeed' resulted in the observation that second-study students may 'be slightly more relaxed and enjoy it a little more' (P13\_IVTs). Similarly, four teachers noticed some differences between postgraduate and undergraduate students in their approaches to performance; while two of them regarded postgraduate students as more self-aware and less competitive, the other two perceived them as particularly self-critical but not necessarily more competitive.

### *8.5.1.1 Recitals, auditions and repertoire*

Most participants associated performance-related competition among students as connected to three main aspects: recitals, auditions and repertoire. End-of-year performances and final recitals were regarded as potentially competitive by six teachers. P4\_IVTs, in particular, thought that the possibility to choose between giving a 30-minute and a 45-minute undergraduate final recital had enhanced a sense of competition among students:

This new two-tier recital business [...] really upsets me. Because everybody thinks that the 30-minute recital is the little one and the big one is the 45-minute recital. That's the big one, that's the most important thing. And so, for example, singers who actually haven't got the voice to do 45-minutes, they just haven't! [...]. They're too young, too inexperienced and it's just made it so immensely competitive: 'oh if you can't do the 45-minute one, you just do the little one'.

However, two other teachers considered that the self-focussed nature of recitals where students 'are very much on their own track' (P9\_IVTs), performing individual repertoire, and in which they do not directly compete for a coveted opportunity, means that these do not foster the same level of competition that is entailed in auditions.

More than half of the teachers (n=9) regarded departmental ensemble auditions as competitive as students 'go to audition for a limited supply of parts' (P13\_IVTs). Likewise, P1\_IVTs referred to limited seat availability for certain instruments (e.g. oboe, flute, bassoon) as a reason for high levels of competition and wished that more ensembles could be implemented to provide opportunities for those instrumentalists who may be left out due to limited seat availability in existing ensembles. Some specific audition-based ensembles were considered particularly competitive by four participants, while seven teachers regarded the concerto audition that students can undertake during their second



undergraduate year or within their postgraduate study<sup>35</sup> as inherently competitive. In this regard, P11\_IVTs shared an interesting thought:

Everybody talks about it. And then I think the actual concerto itself is an excuse to, like, show off, isn't it? So that's the whole point of the concerto, in a way, it's a chance to sort of demonstrate your skill. So, I think the fact that it exists in the first place will invite competition.

Furthermore, one participant (P10\_IVTs) believed that the opportunity for non-music students to audition for a seat in the Symphony Orchestra might also create competition between music and non-music students.

Another performance-related aspect regarded as fostering competition among students was repertoire (n=7). While three teachers believed that choosing the same repertoire could induce students to compare each other's performances, three others stated that students' perceptions of specific repertoire (e.g. operatic repertoire for singers, piano concertos for pianists) as a 'high watermark of performing ability' (P13\_IVTs) can create pressure. More broadly, however, two teachers considered that some genres foster different feelings among students; in particular, jazz and baroque music were regarded as less competitive than classical music, though no further details were given.

Two teachers named aspects of social desirability in relation to specific ensembles or performance contexts as potentially prompting competition among students. P14\_IVTs, for example, reported:

Pre-Covid the competition could be also about how many people turn out to so-and-so's recital and so-and-so's recital compared to mine, how long the applause went on for afterwards. [...] But this may make a person feel on that day, 'oh, you know, for [Student X] the hall was full and I've only

---

<sup>35</sup> As explained in Chapter 3 (section 3.6.4) Year 2 undergraduate students or postgraduate students who will still be enrolled as students at the University of York the following year are given every year the opportunity to audition to perform solo works with an accompanying ensemble, including but not only solo concertos; this audition is generally referred to as the 'concerto audition'.

got the first two rows'. So, you can't take away from someone those kinds of competitive elements, because that's how they feel.

Consequently, this may indicate that the visibility of the elements that construct social desirability is likely to heighten competitive feelings among students who may feel pressure to display elements that may make them more popular and visible among their peers and in front of the staff.

#### *8.5.1.2 Social media, recording and assessments*

Other departmental aspects that were believed by teachers to generate competitive feelings related to social media, recording and assessments. Two participants acknowledged social media as a potential contributor to heightened competitive feelings among students: 'because of videos and recordings they may hear of other musicians of a similar age on social media' (P6\_IVTs). Interestingly, only one participant (P12\_IVTs) discussed the potential feelings of competition that might arise with regard to recording, particularly in light of the increased amount of recording as a teaching tool that took place during the Covid-19 outbreak:

I think recording is [...] a really useful tool, and it's one that we've particularly had to work with a lot more. And yeah, possibly maybe one can kind of try and pursue the sense of an ideal recording and therefore become more competitive with themselves.

Eight teachers believed that assessments have the potential to create competition among students who might either choose to compare their marks with peers or put pressure on themselves to achieve high marks; five participants referred specifically to performance assessments while the other three did not specify the type of assessment. Two teachers raised potential issues that concern perceptions of marking consistency: a string instrument teacher noted their students' concerns about being assessed by staff members with a different instrumental specialisation, while another teacher raised potential concerns around the consistency of marking recitals of different durations: 'Then of course you have the problem of how you mark it, because if they've done 45 minutes and somebody else has only done the 30 minute one, how

do you mark that?’ (P4\_IVTs). While two participants reported having had experience as music performance examiners and discussing marking criteria with their students, only one of them (P3\_IVTs) provided further insights into how their role as an ABRSM examiner informed their approach to these discussions:

I am less experienced with using the criteria for assessing departmental performances because I've not done that myself, but I can use that knowledge to show students how they have been marked according to a set of criteria that the department presents.

### *8.5.2 Aspects softening competition in the department*

Most teachers held a positive view of the department, feeling that support was in place for both students and teachers; indeed, ten of them explicitly stated feeling supported in the fulfilment of the pastoral aspect of their role (discussed further in 8.7.1). Similarly, eight teachers perceived students’ relationships in the department to be friendly, which resulted in them being mostly supportive of each other, evidenced, for example, by ‘the way they support each other’s final recitals’ (P7\_IVTs). On a practical level, policies like seat rotation in the orchestras, the existence of student-led groups and ensembles, and variety of opportunities beyond performance activities were believed by several teachers to contribute to reduce competitive feelings among students. P14\_IVTs, for example, believed that ‘the department has been pretty strenuous in its claim to [...] have as much open access to [opportunities for students] as possible’.

Another aspect that was deemed by some teachers to soften competition within the department was the flexible project system that allows students to explore multiple music-related areas, which potentially enables students to have an individual profile of projects and, as a consequence, to have agency over their engagement with those projects that they feel may involve a competitive culture. In this regard, P12\_IVTs noted that alongside performance, students explore other projects (e.g. composition, women composers, musicology, conducting, editing, etc.): ‘[in the UoY Music Department] there's this kind of freedom that allows them to be a little bit more experimental, without necessarily having to go down a fairly traditional path of making sure you learn Chopin’ (P12\_IVTs).

### *8.5.3 Discussion: Teachers' views of competition in the department*

The majority of teachers believed that their students experienced feelings of competition within the department, particularly but not only, in relation to performance. Some teachers believed that both second-study instrumentalists/singers and postgraduate students felt lower levels of competition as compared to first-study undergraduate students. Such perception of postgraduate students might have to do with their older age and individuality of topic for research students, which were regarded by three teachers as a potential marker of greater self-awareness; this could be linked to potentially lessened vulnerability to competitive feelings.

Undergraduate final recitals were regarded as competitive by a few teachers. The implications of final-year recitals on students might be multiple; students who were not advised to undertake a final-year recital may perceive themselves as less skilled and, potentially, less capable to compete for performing opportunities in the future than their peers who opted for the recital. Furthermore, as P4\_IVTs suggested, it might be speculated that the differentiation between a 45-minute and a 30-minute recital could create competition, potentially encouraging students to see the 45-minute recital as more prestigious and desirable.

Auditions were regarded as highly competitive by over half of the participants. Teachers' views seemed to indicate that their instrumental specialisation influenced their susceptibility to the perception of specific opportunities as particularly competitive; for example, one wind teacher (P1\_IVTs) noted that while a higher number of orchestral seats are available for some instruments (e.g. string players), others (e.g. bassoon players) might have fewer chances to obtain an ensemble position, which could exacerbate competition among students, a view that corroborates existing literature (Diaz, 2010). Similarly, piano teachers tended to notice primarily the competitiveness of the concerto audition which, unlike orchestral seats, is available to pianists. One teacher also mentioned students' potential feelings of competition related to auditions for the Symphony Orchestra being open to non-music students, defined as those students who 'although not vocational or aspirational in terms of a career in music, participate in music making while preparing for other, non-music-based careers' (Robson & Kenny, 2017, p. 869). In this regard, it seems that the sense of competition experienced by music students also entailed an element of

*unfairness* associated with the perception that opportunities provided by the Music Department should be primarily aimed at and accessed by departmental students. Evidence from literature indicates that high tuition fees tend to increase students' expectations towards university support resources and employment outcome increase (Bates & Kaye, 2014; Huang, 2021; Tomlinson, 2017). Consequently, perceptions of auditions for non-music students as unfair competition might be associated with the high fee that students pay to be enrolled in the UoY Music Department since the UK government ceased to provide free higher education in 1998 (Azmat & Simion, 2017).

Some genres (e.g. classical music) were considered by some participants as more competitive than others (e.g. jazz and baroque). These differentiations corroborate literature outlining the high competitiveness of classical music contests (McCormick, 2015) as well as the potentially more inclusive collaborative process of improvisation (Landau & Limb, 2017), which particularly applies to jazz music. In addition, a comparative study highlighted that classical musicians tended to attach great importance to the technical quality of performances as compared to jazz musicians who focus more on the fun elements of making music (Creech et al., 2008).

A few participants believed that competition might lead students to strive to be able to compete at the same level as others; for instance, students might tackle unsuitable repertoire or undertake competitive opportunities beyond their capabilities. While this could be motivating and accelerate student progress, elements of social desirability may influence students' choices of specific opportunities. Several teachers observed that some ensembles and circumstances (e.g. the number of attendees at final year undergraduate recitals) were regarded by students as more prestigious – and therefore more desirable – than others. It might be speculated that there are at least two consequences of the perceptions of some opportunities as particularly desirable. Firstly, students may want to explore repertoire beyond their current capabilities when this is a pre-requisite to access those opportunities (e.g. operatic repertoire, solo and orchestral pieces). Secondly, they might perceive hierarchical differences between themselves and peers who succeed in gaining coveted opportunities or those with particular circumstances (e.g. students who have more attendees at their final recital), which might have consequences on their self-perception as musicians.

The use of social media was believed to influence students' perceptions of

competition by a few teachers, while only one participant identified recording opportunities as potentially competitive. This could be related to the fact that during the Covid-19 pandemic students may have made consistent use of recording as a learning tool and, as such, the competitiveness they used to experience in the physical space of the department may have shifted towards the idea of an ideal recording and creating a benchmark that may or may not be achievable. None of the IVTs mentioned the academic and composition prizes awarded by the department as potentially competitive. This may be due to students not talking about these with their teachers as their performance specialisation does not embed the academic or composition aspects related to prizes; consequently, it could be the case that teachers are not aware of these prizes as much as academic staff.

Assessments, instead, were believed to create competition among students by the majority of participants. Students' performances in the UoY Music Department are assessed by the academic staff in relation to marking criteria as explicitly expressed in the student handbooks<sup>36</sup>, but only two teachers reported discussing the marking criteria with their students and did not specify whether these discussions were encouraged by the department or resulted from their own individual choices. Both of them had experience of dealing directly with assessment criteria, respectively in the capacity of ABRSM examiner and academic lecturer, possibly indicating that they have been particularly exposed to the practice of aligning performances with marking criteria. In consideration of the higher number of consistent contact hours between teachers and students across the academic year as compared to academic supervisors or other members of staff, IVTs may have a particularly influential role towards students; thus, awareness of the marking process – particularly in relation to performance alignment with marking criteria – could contribute to reduce the sense of competition among students resulting from performance assessments. It might also be speculated that discussions of marking criteria with IVTs may benefit students' approach to academic assessments, also evaluated in relation to specific marking criteria provided by the department.

The majority of teachers, however, thought that the UoY Music Department actively operated on several levels to discourage and discuss competition among

---

<sup>36</sup> Details of the marking process of students' assessments are provided in Chapter 3, section 3.6.1.

students and, consequently, the culture resulting from the choices operated by the department was regarded as more collaborative than competitive. The departmental offering of various academic projects beyond a purely performance-oriented pathway was perceived by IVTs as an effective way to reduce competition among undergraduate students; indeed, the department places a limit on the number of performance-focused projects that each undergraduate student can take throughout their degree. Furthermore, the relationships among students within the department were deemed positively by several teachers. Thus, it seems that both practical and environmental factors acted in a positive way to allow for competition in the UoY Music Department to be acknowledged, discussed and, whenever possible, softened among students.

## **8.6 Teachers' perceptions of the department's culture**

### *8.6.1 Competition in relation to other institutions*

The high percentage of teachers who had current or previous experience of teaching in another higher education institution (64%) enabled comparisons of different institutional cultures. Three participants believed the UoY Music Department to be more shaped by competition than the other institutions they worked in, namely other university departments. Interestingly, all of them associated a perceived higher level of competitiveness with the UoY Music Department's strong emphasis on performance: 'There's more performance at York than at [X institution], so I think there's potential for more competition at York. The other institution is a much more academic department' (P7\_IVTs).

However, more than half of the participants believed that the UoY Music Department was far less dominated by competition in comparison with other institutions where competition was more engrained within the institutional curriculum, and deemed the department's institutional culture as supportive and relaxed. In this regard, one participant described the UoY as 'a bit of an outlier' (P2\_IVTs), and one other stated that, differently from other institutions, the UoY Music Department 'really does try to deal with the more negative aspects of competition' (P14\_IVTs).

In relation to different institutional orientation, all four participants who taught in a conservatoire alongside the UoY Music Department shared a similar view of conservatoires being more competitive environments due to their strong performance orientation.

### *8.6.2 Suggestions for further actions and challenges*

Despite a widespread positive perception of the institutional culture of the department as a place where the negative effects of competition are limited or dealt with positively, some participants believed that more could be done to address issues of competition. Eight teachers advocated for open, non-judgemental discussions with students to promote awareness of both how and why competitive feelings happen. In this regard, P10\_IVTs claimed:

I think a bit more explanation that playing first [instrument in an orchestra] isn't everything. [Explaining that] it isn't the be-all and end-all could be a way to reduce that feeling of competition so everyone feels more like a team, because it's what it is ultimately.

Four teachers, on the other hand, focussed on the importance of institutional discussions about competitiveness within musical careers, identifying the differences between university and the professional world as potentially challenging: 'The point is the transition from a learning institution [...] and those early years into professional life, whether you feel it's radically different in the real world compared to how you felt it was institutionally and how it was discussed' (P14\_IVTs).

Six teachers, furthermore, believed that by engaging with a higher number of opportunities within or outside the department, students could learn from peers and get used to the competitive aspects that come with performing. More specifically, two of them believed that the department should provide students with more performance assessments to learn to deal with the unpredictable elements of performance. One of them (P7\_IVTs) stated:

It's actually possible for a student in first year to go all the way through three years at York university without doing a public performance – when I



say 'public' I mean 'open to other students' – and then do a final recital at the end of it having not played to other people for three years [...] Learning an instrument is one thing but actually learning to perform is another thing altogether. And if you can go through three years without performing to another student, how do you develop that?

Some participants also identified potential barriers to further actions. Practicalities related to availability of performance spaces and additional pressure on staff, particularly in terms of time, were regarded as potential barriers for enhancing students' performance platforms. Also, financial constraints were acknowledged by one teacher (P10\_IVTs) as a barrier to departmental support for students, particularly in relation to offering ongoing free-of-charge Alexander Technique sessions or 'a dedicated counsellor who very much understood the profession and the nature of the department', both of which might support students' understandings of competition and aid them in dealing with it.

### *8.6.3 Discussion: Teachers' perceptions of the department's institutional culture*

Coherently with existing literature outlining the high competitiveness of performance-based environments (Perkins et al., 2017; Williamon & Thompson, 2006), participants tended to associate the level of competition between the UoY Music Department and other institutions they worked in with the emphasis on performance activities that each institution promoted. In this regard, it is not surprising that conservatoires were deemed as more competitive than the UoY Music Department and, more generally, tertiary-level institutions whose curricular offerings are not strongly performance-oriented were perceived as less competitive than others.

It might be observed that some competitive stances, particularly as related to performance activities, cannot be removed; for example, different seat availability for certain instruments within the Symphony Orchestra is connected to the sectional requirements of the orchestra itself. Similarly, while recitals have the potential to create competition among students, it could be argued that the formation of a performer identity may be prioritised by some music students in a university music

department (Dibben, 2006; Pellegrino, 2009), thus performing activities would be seen as an important part of the educational offer. Nevertheless, in light of the extensive possibilities beyond performance that university music departments might offer (Pitts, 2003), teachers' positive reception of a flexible study programme at undergraduate level is of particular interest; university music departments, indeed, might articulate their specific values through a specific curriculum design that includes both performance-driven opportunities and alternative pathways, enabling students with different interests and inclinations to explore and specialise in a variety of music-related domains.

Participants provided some suggestions aimed at reducing instances of competition in the department, but also seemed aware of the potential barriers to implement these, particularly in relation to the financial sustainability of new initiatives, room availability and pressure on staff in terms of time management. Beyond general support for more discussions, some teachers claimed that a greater number of performance-related activities would prove beneficial to students. In particular, they believed that more performance opportunities would help students deal with the pressure of performance delivery; it should be noted, though, that not all students are invested in developing their performance skills as some of them may be more interested in other music-related activities (e.g. teaching, composing, musicology), and further performance opportunities may not be particularly attractive for these students. Furthermore, students are likely to have different levels of exposure to performance on the basis of their instrumental specialisation. These circumstances may result in inequalities of opportunity for some students to take advantages of the benefits derived from collaborative opportunities (Sawyer, 2008) as well as to enhance their ability to deal with self-challenge elements that could be associated with performances. In light of this, the suggestion made by one teacher to provide further opportunities to students who currently get limited access to ensemble performances is likely to be particularly relevant.

## **8.7 Teachers' provision of support to students**

### *8.7.1 Impact of competition on students' wellbeing; support provision*

Competitive feelings were deemed as having a potentially negative impact on students' wellbeing by 12 teachers. Some of them believed that feelings of competition may lead students to 'perceive themselves sometimes as not being good enough' (P4\_IVTs). However, four participants found it difficult to comment on the specific effects of competition on mental health or wellbeing: 'There were all sorts of other factors at play as well, so I wouldn't want to represent that as being about the competitiveness that they were feeling inside of themselves' (P14\_IVTs).

Almost all of the participants (n=12) felt responsible for supporting students and discouraging competitive behaviours. Seven teachers observed that their frequent individual contact with students enabled more insights into students' needs in comparison to academic staff. P11\_IVTs, for example, reported being often contacted by members of academic staff for more information regarding individual students' wellbeing concerns.

Several teachers (n=9) displayed commitment to help students deal with competitive feelings. The practical steps that were taken to reduce students' competitive feelings included the promotion of performance collaborations among students, repertoire differentiation, improvisation and mindfulness techniques. Furthermore, two teachers encouraged students to be proactive in 'generat[ing] their own performance opportunities' (P7\_IVTs) which would help them deal with MPA-related issues. Nine participants reported awareness of the support systems put in place by the university and would refer students who might need extra support to these: 'I would always let their tutor know and I would refer them either to the Open Door and to the Alexander Technique teacher [...]. Several times I referred students to experts in these things into mental health' (P13\_IVTs). Three participants claimed to be conscious of their professional limitations and boundaries in providing students with support. P3\_IVTs claimed:

It is not my job to be their counsellor. It would not work, I'm not qualified.

What I do feel is my responsibility is to make sure I recognise if there is a

problem, make sure that I have talked to them to check that they know where they can find help.

Lastly, three teachers independently engaged with existing literature to inform their approach to pastoral care and one of them relied on their own past experiences of supporting students to inform their current support practices: 'I have a few of my own things that I use a lot which are based on my own experience of talking to people and from what I observed from students, I've found that can often be helpful' (P3\_IVTs).

### *8.7.2 Limitations to teachers' support*

Limitations to support provision were acknowledged by a few teachers. While most participants believed student support to be part of their duties, none reported having been specifically trained for this part of their work. Furthermore, two participants identified limitations in relation to the undergraduate students' instrumental lesson allowance, which covers 15 one-hour lessons during the academic year and influences the amount of time the teacher may devote to student support: 'We see them once every two weeks and time's so short. [...] There have been a few lessons where I've just basically talked for the majority of an hour but I also feel that's not really what I'm there to do' (P7\_IVTs). Some teachers also felt that students' competitive attitudes might act as a barrier to support provision from their teacher. P14\_IVTs believed that:

If one chooses to see [musical endeavours] as competitive and not collaborative, that is one's choice, but be aware that is an active choice that you're making to perceive this as competitive when it is collaborative. So, it's a bit like if you want to knock yourself out with that kind of perception then there's literally nothing I can do other than encourage you to construct it in a different, different way.

### *8.7.3 Discussion: Teachers' provision of support to students*

While most teachers seemed to be alert to the consequences of unhealthy feelings of competition on students' mental wellbeing, particularly in relation to students' sense of self-worth, none of them referred to the physical consequences that such feelings

might produce. A competitive focus might result in students practising for a prolonged bout of time with few, if any, breaks; indeed, over-practice could result in an increased risk of developing performance-related musculoskeletal disorders (Ackermann et al., 2002; Matei et al., 2018). Nonetheless, students' practising habits are often not visible to teachers and unless students decide to disclose these, teachers may not be aware of students' practising behaviours. Furthermore, the limited integration of IVTs within the departmental academic undergraduate curriculum might also affect support: in recent years the department has offered an academic project aimed at understanding and promoting awareness of musicians' physical and mental health, but IVTs are not involved in its delivery. Moreover, being the project optional, not all students are exposed to its content. Consequently, while the department has taken measures to promote discussions around physical health-related issues, awareness of these issues might be available to a restricted number of students, and IVTs' limited involvement with these discussions might provide them with an inaccurate picture of students' perceptions of health-related issues.

Participants reported taking some practical measures to support students who experience wellbeing issues that may be related to competitive feelings. In particular, it is noticeable that the majority of them signposted students to appropriate support services when needed. The implications of this on the effectiveness of support provision are particularly important, as it shows teachers' awareness of the institutional support protocol. While most teachers seemed generally responsive to pastoral care requirements, it should be noted that some institutional barriers might prevent them from fulfilling pastoral responsibilities. As non-contracted members of staff, their activities within the department are limited to instrumental/vocal teaching and they are not formally trained by the university in pastoral support; thus, it might be speculated that the effects of competition in areas other than performance may not be visible to them. Moreover, as teachers are not directly involved in the assessment process of final recitals or involved directly in teaching or assessing performance-based projects as well as end-of-year performances, it may be the case that only some parts of departmental performance activities, and particularly the connection these may have with students' feelings of competition, are visible to them.

Another barrier to support provision as identified by teachers related to time constraints. While members of academic staff have one-to-one meetings with their

individual undergraduate supervisees twice per term to discuss academic development and pastoral matters, teachers may find that students need to discuss pastoral issues within their instrumental/vocal lessons, thereby reducing the amount of time available for work on the instrument itself. Furthermore, in light of their employment as non-contracted members of staff, the existence of a hierarchical structure within the department may be perceived by IVTs, who could view themselves in a lower position as compared to academic staff. It could be questioned, therefore, whether these factors influence IVTs' willingness to allocate time to support provision, particularly in consideration of the time constraints derived from the limited number of yearly teaching hours, which are likely to create pressure to focus on students' instrumental/vocal development rather than on pastoral concerns.

## **8.8 Teachers' perceptions of the competitiveness within the music industry**

### *8.8.1 Competition within musical performance careers*

Throughout the interviews, participants seemed to understand musical careers as performance-oriented and, therefore, data gathered on the teachers' views of musical careers are based on this conceptualisation. A high level of competition within performance careers was recognised by seven teachers. These participants described that particular domain as 'tough' (P2\_IVTs; P11\_IVTs) and 'unbelievably competitive' (P13\_IVTs). Furthermore, two of them believed that students were not necessarily aware of such competitiveness, although P13\_IVTs had the impression that some students were proactively trying to 'impress' a member of the academic staff whom they perceived as 'a person with contacts in the professional world'.

The high competitiveness of the music industry prompted some teachers to consider how to negotiate students' exposure to competition within a higher music education setting and the competitive reality of musical careers. In this regard, over half of the participants (n=8) believed that experiencing competition in higher education contexts could prepare students for the competitiveness of the profession; P5\_IVTs, for example, believed that 'to some extent there is competition and there always will be. I think it's good to experience it before you go out there'. On the other

hand, two participants expressed concerns about the potential shock students might experience in relation to professional careers. P8\_IVTs stated:

They have no idea what it is to be in the outside world, what it is to work, what it is to do anything, so when they get out there... They lived in a bubble when they were in childhood and they came to university and the whole thing is a kind of big shock. But then they're again in a bubble themselves, they go out after university and it's another big shock.

Interestingly, one participant mentioned that a highly competitive attitude might have negative consequences on musicians' access to professional opportunities. With regard to orchestral auditions, they said: 'I think those people who often take it seriously and are overly competitive often get weeded out of the profession because it means they're not the best at cooperating or they're a bit more self-involved' (P10\_IVTs).

Consequently, students' potential unawareness of the reality of professional performance careers poses questions in relation to teachers' positions and approaches towards their students. P2\_IVTs, for example, reported situations where students' ambitions were not attuned to the reality of performance careers, and the teachers' responsibilities to be 'kind, nurturing and supportive' might be difficult to reconcile with concerns not to raise false hope about future professional careers.

### *8.8.2 Discussion: The competitiveness of the music industry*

As specified in the findings above (section 8.8.1), comments made by the teachers mainly related to the performance music industry. Findings outlined that IVTs' views on the inevitability of competitiveness within the music industry aligned with those of several music students (Chapters 5, 6, 7). It is relevant to note that the word *inevitable* may suggest acceptance of competition as a necessary evil rather than as a welcomed aspect of a musical career; however, as Miksza et al. (2021) suggested, music students' exposure to high levels of competitiveness in higher education may impact positively on their resilience and, consequently, make students more inclined to regard competition as to be expected within their musical careers.

Teachers had mixed views of students' levels of preparation for musical

careers. For example, a few of them believed that students did not have a clear picture of the degree of competitiveness that they will face in the job market. On the other hand, at least one participant perceived their students' actions as an indicator of their desire to build up a professional network to gain advantage over other potential competitors, which clearly indicates some level of awareness. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, these opinions were particularly tailored to performance careers; students' activities and engagement in other domains and relationship to their future careers may not be as visible to IVTs.

Most participants thought that experiences of competition in higher music education could be beneficial for students in light of the competitiveness they will be likely to experience in a professional capacity. Thus, the benefits of experiencing competition in the department, as expressed by some IVTs, seem to validate explicitly competitive opportunities (e.g. auditions) and competitive behaviours among students. Nonetheless, one participant believed that individuals who engage in strongly competitive behaviours may not be in an advantageous professional position, particularly in performance contexts where teamwork is an essential requirement, such as ensembles. Furthermore, it could be argued that higher education is regarded as a period of transition from identity as students to that of workers (Cage et al., 2021) which may suggest that competitive opportunities should be handled carefully. Recent reports on university students' levels of wellbeing show that students are a vulnerable category (Universities UK, 2018) and it is departments' responsibility to provide them with a safe environment where they can learn and acquire career-relevant skills in a non-threatening manner. For this reason, a soft attitude to competition in the department that is considerate of both the benefits of experiencing competition in light of their future professional careers and of the risks of engaging in unhealthy competition that has a negative impact on students' self-perceptions and/or wellbeing would be beneficial.

## **8.9 Conclusion**

This chapter investigated the perspectives of 14 instrumental and vocal teachers who worked in the UoY Music Department at the time of the data collection in relation to



their students' perceptions of competition within the above mentioned department. During the interviews teachers provided an insight into their conceptualisation of competition in higher music education contexts. All participants identified competition as inherent to higher music education. Nonetheless, the majority of them tended to see competition either as potentially motivating or damaging to students, depending on situational factors, students' attitudes to competition, and teachers' teaching styles. Interestingly, one teacher (P2\_IVTs) suggested that a lack of competition in higher music education settings may have damaging effects on students' ability to assess their own capabilities in relation to the outside world, and this opinion is of particular relevance as it seems to be in contrast with the general tendency among participants to focus on the negative effects of competition on students (section 8.7.1).

Teachers did not hold a univocal view regarding how feelings of competition are originated, but most of them believed that factors such as external judgement, individual inclinations and past experiences may contribute to create them. Nonetheless, they all agreed that their own attitudes and behaviours towards competition within their one-to-one lessons are likely to influence their students' attitudes. As a consequence, most participants discouraged explicit competitive behaviours within their teaching, but it may be the case that some of their teaching choices may inadvertently promote self-competitive feelings that could have a negative impact on some students. For example, a few participants reported articulating competitive opportunities created by the department as learning opportunities (section 8.4.3), but it could be questioned what the implications of unsuccessful outcomes on less confident students' self-belief may be, and whether teachers' efforts to soften the competitive element of these opportunities may be sufficient to induce students to interpret these as learning opportunities.

A generally positive view of the UoY Music Department as a friendly, not excessively competitive place emerged from most of the interviews. While participants acknowledged some aspects of the department as potentially competitive ones (e.g. performance opportunities, assessments, social media), the department may have limited control over the opportunity to exclude some of these – such as assessments – from its educational offer, but policies including anonymity for academic assessments and moderation are in place to guarantee a high standard of equality and fairness, which may have a positive impact on the extent to which students perceive

assessments in general as competitive. Some teachers believed that specific performance opportunities within the department were considered by students as particularly desirable and, therefore, the competition to access to these opportunities was particularly sharp. While students were likely to have multiple reasons to desire to enter these opportunities (section 8.5.1.1), participants unfortunately did not express their thoughts about the department's position in terms of actively trying to limit students' perceptions of these as particularly desirable ones. However, as most participants noted, students are highly likely to encounter competition when entering the job market (section 8.8.1), and a moderate exposure to competition in higher music education contexts may provide them with the tools needed to be able to face higher levels of competition in their profession.

The comparison between the UoY Music Department and other institutions where participants worked tended to substantiate a generally positive reception of the department. Unsurprisingly, strongly performance-oriented institutions were deemed as particularly competitive and while teachers had mixed views on the extent to which the UoY Music Department was performance-oriented, some of them believed that institutional policies related to ensemble seat rotation as well as the existence of student-led performance groups effectively moderated competition among students in performance contexts. In this regard, a particularly relevant characteristic of the department was the flexible undergraduate project system, which provides students with opportunities beyond performance and, consequently, a framework which might reduce competitive feelings emerging connected to performance activities (section 8.5.2).

Most participants recognised competitive feelings as having the potential to impact negatively on students' mental wellbeing, though some who reported having engaged in conversations with students about their wellbeing believed that other factors beyond feelings of competition also influenced it. While it may be difficult to isolate the sole effect of competition on students' wellbeing, teachers' awareness of its potential impact seems to have contributed to consider how their role may place them in a position to provide support; indeed, in light of their individual relationship with students, almost all of them felt responsibility for providing students with pastoral support and were aware of the institutional resources in place to signpost to students. Furthermore, some teachers believe that more discussions within the department

about competition-related aspects may be beneficial for students, particularly in consideration of the high degree of competition that they are likely to encounter in their future career. However, limitations in terms of financial constraint, room availability and increased demand on staff were also identified, which potentially indicates that there is room for additional investigation into how the department, the university and its support services may collaborate towards a holistic approach to support provision, as recently suggested by Caleb (2019).

# **Chapter 9: Academic and administrative staff perspectives on students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department**

## **9.1 Introduction**

This chapter investigates the perspectives of 14 Music staff members employed by the University of York at the time of the data collection in two different capacities: 11 participants were members of the academic staff (e.g. professors, senior lecturers, lecturers and associate lecturers) while the other three were members of the administrative staff (e.g. technical staff members, departmental managers). The academic staff members will be referred to as AcSM and administrative staff members as AdSM. Findings will be discussed in relation to six major themes: staff members' conceptualisations of competition, competition within the University of York (UoY) Music Department, perceptions of the institutional culture within the UoY Music Department, the relationship between competition and students' wellbeing, perception of institutional support, and the relationship between competition and students' career choices.

Online and face-to-face interviews were used as the data collection method (see 9.2) according to the interviewee's location and preference. Similar to instrumental and vocal teachers (see Chapter 8), academic and administrative staff were not considered as a vulnerable category by the ethical committee that approved this research, therefore all of the questions were focussed on participants' thoughts regarding music students' perceptions of competition in the UoY Music Department.

Due to the sequencing of the various research phases, some of the interview questions were informed by students' questionnaire responses, others from responses to the interviews with instrumental/vocal teachers and some were created in relation to existing literature on music competition, and from awareness of relevant aspects emerging from my own personal experience as an insider-researcher. Further details

regarding the implications of the researcher's position as an insider have been presented in Chapter 3.

## 9.2 Procedure

In July 2020 a pilot interview was conducted with one member of the academic staff employed by the UoY Music Department. Following the pilot interview, some questions were removed, added, or adjusted to gather the most appropriate data and in March 2021, 25 members of the academic staff employed by the UoY Music Department at that time received an interview invitation email to take part in this research project. The invitation email included an information sheet covering the project aims, data protection policy, anonymity, participants' rights and use of data. Due to the AcSM contact details being published on the UoY Music Department webpage, the invitation email was sent directly by the researcher. Three AcSM were not invited to take part: two of them were excluded due to their direct involvement with this research project respectively in the capacity of academic supervisor and internal examiner, and one other had previously taken part in the pilot interview. Data from the pilot interview is included as part of the analysis and findings. Among the 25 AcSM who received the invitation email, three declined the invitation, 11 did not answer, and 11 agreed to be interviewed. Unfortunately, data from one participant could not be used due to external circumstances resulting in incomplete/unusable responses. In total, data from 11 AcSM (10 participants plus the pilot participant) out of the 26 who were invited (42%) will be presented and discussed.

The interviews with AdSM were conducted in July 2022 and a similar procedure was adopted: five AdSM received an interview invitation email from the researcher and three of them decided to take part while the other two declined. One AdSM was temporarily unavailable and, therefore, was not included in the invitation email. In total, data from three AdSM out of the five who were invited (60%) will be presented and discussed.

All participants were required to read an information form about the research procedure and sign a consent form in advance of the interview. A written transcript of their interview was sent to those who requested it and two full weeks were given for them to check it and make any changes they wished; they were granted the possibility

to extend the deadline, if needed. In consideration of their similar contractual positions within the department, their physical presence in the department and contact hours with the students, data from both academic and administrative members of the staff is discussed together in this chapter. The link to the full data set is available in Appendix D.

### 9.3 Demographic data

Data from 14 participants – 11 AcSM and three AdSM – is presented and discussed in this chapter. Table 9.1 shows demographic details in relation to their number of years of employment within the UoY Music Department.

*Table 9.1: Years spent working as contracted members of the academic/administrative staff at the UoY Music Department*

	<b>Fewer than 5 years</b>	<b>5-9 years</b>	<b>10-19 years</b>	<b>20 or more</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	6	2	2	4

As the above table shows, almost half of the participants (six of them, 43%) had been working for the department for fewer than five years at the time of the interview, 29% (four participants) for more than 20 years, 14% (two participants) for a number of years between five and nine and the remaining 14% (two participants) between ten and 19 years.

Participants were asked to provide details regarding previous employments in higher education. The responses ranged from having no previous employment to employments across higher education institutions of varying types. Table 9.2 shows participants' responses as grouped across five categories. For formatting purposes, the following abbreviations are provided:

1. Universities: UNI
2. Universities and conservatoires: UNI +CONS
3. Universities and university colleges: UNI + COL
4. No other employment: NOE
4. No further detail provided: N/A

*Table 9.2: Participants' employment as academic/administrative staff members in other higher education institutions*

	<b>UNI</b>	<b>UNI + CONS</b>	<b>UNI + COL</b>	<b>NOE</b>	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Number of participants</b>	7	2	3	1	1

Table 9.2 shows that 50% (n=7) of the participants had previously worked in other universities, while two participants (14%) had been employed in other universities and conservatoires and three others in universities and university colleges (22%). One participant (7%) did not have any previous higher education employment and the remaining 7% (one participant) did not provide any detail of their previous employment. In light of participants' different areas of expertise and potential association with other subjects that may pertain to other departments (e.g. sound engineering, other performing arts, media studies) as well as to protect their anonymity, no question was asked in relation to the type of department/s that participants had previously worked in.

## **9.4 Staff conceptualisations of competition within the UoY Music Department**

### *9.4.1 Views on competition*

While participants were not asked to define competition, they all referred to the multiple aspects that concerned competitive feelings as experienced by higher education music students; thus, this data indicated how competition was conceptualised by participants. Most of them (n=11) believed that students will inevitably experience some form of competition either in higher education or in their future career. P10\_AcSM, in particular, considered competition intended as external judgement as a necessary condition for music as an art form:

I think we have to be able to deal to some extent with the fact that people will make judgements about our work. Without judgement or without critical appraisal or whatever, without us forming opinions about people's

work and discussing what they're trying to do and disagreeing about it, the arts can't exist. I think it's inevitable that we face that.

Despite a general agreement towards considering competition in higher education as inevitable, participants held different views as to how competitive feelings are experienced by students. Some of them believed feelings of competition to be dependent on the circumstances; for example, P6\_AcSM thought that students who specialise in composition are driven by self-competition whereas performers may be more inclined to compete with their peers. Other participants (n=9) referred to competition in a predominantly peer-directed manner: 'I think the traditional idea of competition is that people feel they're falling behind, they're not going to make the grade, they're not as good as everybody else and they get anxious and then that affects them' (P3\_AcSM).

A few participants (n=4) tended to orient competition in relation to contexts external to university studies, at least to some extent. P3\_AcSM believed that some musical specialisations are less likely to provide scope for competition than others: 'I think community artists are temperamentally not disposed towards a lot of competition and selection. Their targets really would be collaboration rather than competition, and inclusion rather than selection'. Three participants echoed this collaborative view, considering Music and Sound Recording (MASR) students to be less inclined to compete than their peers enrolled in the other BA Music programme as these students 'seem to work in groups quite a lot as that seems to be how they structured that programme' (P13\_AcSM). Furthermore, P10\_AcSM claimed that 'start[ing] to really worry less about how good you are compared to somebody else and develop[ing] your own skills' may be the key for the development of greater musical creativity.

#### *9.4.2 Staff views on the effects of competition*

Four participants acknowledged that competition may have different effects on those who win and those who lose. P5\_AcSM stated:

If you are the best and you win the prizes, of course it is great for your career. Unfortunately for everyone who wins the prize, there are



thousands of thousands who don't win the prize, perhaps get totally disillusioned because of the realisation that they're not in that league, and therefore I suspect the whole experience could be actually slightly dispiriting.

Such conceptualisation of the different effects of competition is of particular interest within the UoY Music Department because, as noted by P2\_AcSM, it poses challenges in relation to balancing the needs of students with different outcomes; those students who might say “‘I won that [audition] and I gave an excellent performance, and I feel great, and that has boosted my career prospects” against the people who didn't get it and the negative effects on this’. On the other hand, when considering broader conceptualisations of competition, such as the outcomes of auditioning to be in a specific vocal ensemble, P12\_AdSM provided an example of circumstances that gives a more nuanced perspective on the outcome of competition for the winners:

But also the other thing with [X vocal ensemble] not only is it hard, they have to rehearse twice a week, they have to have a very high standard but what happened this year is that the really good [members] or those perceived to be really good, have had to actually run it because the [ensemble leader] has been away a lot this year and thought [...] that they would love that the opportunity. And in the older days they might well have done because they might have felt special but in fact [they had to lead the ensemble so many times] that they resented it and were really cross about it. So what I'm trying to say is the people who might have been looked at as the ones who had been favoured, were in fact really hacked off, because they had to do so much more work, actually conducting [X ensemble] and all of that.

Interestingly, this seems to indicate that the effects of competition are not always experienced as may have been expected; indeed, the effects of being chosen to lead the ensemble in light of their supposed higher capabilities may have required these students to deal with unforeseen circumstances in terms of time demand or commitment.

Beyond the different effects of competition on winners and the other competitors, some participants held a twofold view on the effects of competition on students in the UoY Music Department. Five of them believed that competition may either be perceived by students as damaging 'where people see other people's success as their own failure' or motivating when 'people seek to do better based on having been inspired or encouraged by other people's achievements' (P4\_AcSM). This seems to indicate varied attitudes among students which may connect to the type of activity/opportunity that they are competing for/within.

#### *9.4.2.1 Staff perspectives on students' attitudes towards competition*

Several participants (n=8) believed that students' attitudes and reactions towards departmental competition and competitive situations vary depending on various circumstances and influences. For example, five participants believed that the type of competition experienced in high school is likely to inform students' approach to university, while two participants felt that first-year undergraduate students appeared to feel more competitive than their second and third-year peers, either to 'get their voices heard' (P3\_AcSM) or because they 'compete with themselves' (P13\_AdSM). P3\_AcSM also observed that students' inclinations to compete may be mirrored in their project choices:

I think certainly the undergraduates come into the department taking it for granted that there would be an element of competition. And there will always be a few that perhaps are a bit more prepared to challenge that, and those are the ones who I suppose would be temperamentally suited to doing this Community Music module.

Most participants (n=12) believed that students' attitudes to competition in higher education were influenced by institutional elements. In this regard, participants held a variety of different perspectives. Two participants focussed on how either the choices made by the UoY Music Department in terms of providing competitive opportunities (P11\_AcSM) or students' perceptions of prioritising performance over other specialisations (P2\_AcSM) may influence students' attitudes towards competition. Conversely, others (n=6) believed that the environment within the UoY Music

Department did not encourage a competitive performance culture comparable with that of conservatoires. P9\_AcSM, for example, stated: '[At X music college] you get a sense [...] that people are fighting for the number one position and who can play the scales the fastest and all the rest of it. I don't get a sense of that at York'. However, despite the general perception of conservatoire culture as inherently competitive, P5\_AcSM noticed that the university culture may support a laid-back attitude that could damage students' professionalism:

I did get a bit frustrated with some of the university [student's] attitudes to performance, always turning up to rehearsal late, sometimes not turning up at all. [...] I do think it's part of our job as performers to try and train musicians for the real world, and part of that element is competition, let alone of professionalism of rehearsal, knowing your music, of all those sorts of things. I think sometimes the university system is a little sloppy in that training, dare I say. Many of [the students] get a real shock when they go into the real world, you know, turning up only five minutes late and then wonder why they never, ever work for that place ever again.

Lastly, four participants focussed on the influence that staff may exert on students' perceptions of competition. More specifically, these participants thought that staff's manner of ensemble leadership (P12\_AdSM; P13\_AdSM), attitude towards students' recitals and lunchtime concerts (P1\_AcSM) as well as encouraging students to take part in departmental competitions as auditions (P14\_AdSM) are likely to influence students' reactions to competition. P1, for example, stated:

[Performance in the department] is probably emphasised as well through things like members of staff attending lunchtime concerts and things like that, so I think it certainly attaches a degree of significance to performances of the highest quality possible and probably implicitly reinforces the idea that there's an expectation that people should be performing at the highest level they can do and that of course links to the idea of competitiveness.

These findings seem to indicate that students' perceptions of competition within the department are likely to be influenced, at least to some extent, by actions from the staff; in light of this, staff members' awareness of competition in relation to their roles is particularly relevant.

#### *9.4.3 Staff awareness of competition in relation to their roles*

Throughout the interviews participants discussed the extent to which their positions within the UoY Music Department allowed them to be aware of circumstances that resulted in competitive behaviours among students. Both academic and administrative staff members (n=8) acknowledged having a partial view of competition in the department which largely emerges from their academic/administrative activities or conversations they have with students. P13\_AdSM, for example, reported not being aware of competition arising from auditions and other departmental opportunities as they are not 'really involved with it'. Conversely, the lack of visibility of students talking about competition prevented P8\_AcSM from gathering meaningful information about their experiences with competition in the department: 'I think it might be possible that they are comparing against each other but I haven't noticed that explicitly, I think people are obviously generally quite discreet and don't talk [with me] about other [...] students'. P11\_AcSM believed that students' concerns focused the staff on support provision rather than being able to notice positive effects of competition:

I probably don't see people [students] coming to report positive impacts of competition on their mental health because when they tend to book an appointment with me [...] it's because they're struggling with something. So, usually when they come to see me it's based on their negative mental health experience.

Consequently, the staff's individual roles within the department as well as exposure to students' conversations seem to impact on their ability to gather information on students' perceptions of competition.

#### *9.4.4 Discussion: Staff conceptualisation of competition within the UoY Music Department*

Similar to instrumental and vocal teachers, staff members held various understandings of the role of competition within the UoY Music Department, which were likely to be dependent on each participant's individual characteristics, professional experience and position. As observed in 9.4.3, many participants explicitly acknowledged that their views about competition in the department were bounded by their professional responsibilities; therefore, the diversity of participants' opinions as presented in this research is reasonably representative of the staff's different areas of expertise. Furthermore, as one participant noted, students may report competition-related issues and concerns but not positive aspects; this may have prevented participants from noticing other positive effects. It could be speculated that students mainly disclose their concerns because they perceive staff members as the authority that can act on those circumstances generating competitive concerns. Alternatively, however, they might simply experience psychological benefits from the communication of negative feelings, as research suggests (Brans et al., 2014).

Similar to IVTs (Chapter 8), several staff members classified feelings of competition among students in higher music education as inevitable. Of particular interest is the idea expressed by some participants (P10\_AcSM, for example) that competition intended as external judgement inevitably comes with music making and is a pre-requisite for music to exist as an art form (see section 9.4.1). This conceptualisation seems to suggest that music students are likely to experience competition in higher education in the form of pressure to produce material that will be evaluated by the staff or their peers as interesting, fascinating, creative and ultimately successful. It is relevant to notice that the inevitability of competition as expressed by these staff members does not entail negative undertones and is, instead, presented as a matter of fact rather than as a necessary evil that students have to deal with. On the other hand, existing research indicates that competition has been understood traditionally as an integral part of musical pedagogy, either as a mean of professional success through musical contests (Arditi, 2020; Eisenberg & Thompson, 2011; McCormick, 2009) or operating at visible and less visible levels in music education contexts (Powell, 2021); therefore, it may be speculated that participants'

view of competition as inevitable is rooted in a broader pedagogical conceptualisation of music education as competitive.

Some participants acknowledged that competition may enable students to develop musical excellence, a word often used to describe highly skilled performance in 'areas of valuable human endeavor' measured against a set of standardised criteria (Dai, 2013, p. 93). However, Bucura (2020) observed that such conception of excellence, which is rooted in a competitive understanding of music education, may be exclusionary in relation to those students whose musical interests lie outside a traditionally competitively oriented curriculum and may potentially inhibit the growth of their musicianship. Thus, Bucura (2020) argues, a reconceptualisation of excellence and its relationship with competition would prove beneficial.

Participants also shared their views regarding students' attitudes towards competition. Beyond individual characteristics, students' different attitudes were also deemed to be influenced by both pre-university experiences and the institutional culture of the department. Due to their previous school experiences – including cultural educational conditioning for international students – students may be more or less attuned to competition, to the point that they expect it and potentially feel disorientated by its variable presence within the UoY Music Department (more details will be provided in 9.5.1.1). Therefore, students' attitudes to competition could relate to the negotiation of the legacies of their former school experiences – or university experiences, for postgraduate students – with the institutional characteristics of the UoY Music Department. For example, as P5\_AcSM claimed, students who attended private schools are more likely to have been exposed to both competition and high quality music education which could result in a competitive advantage over their peers who were educated in state schools, a suggestion endorsed by recent studies confirming brighter career prospects for UK students educated within the private sector (The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

Some participants observed that different specialisations may be correlated with students' feelings of competition. More specifically, community music and sound recording were regarded as attractive areas for students who may not display a particularly competitive attitude, even though – as will be explored in 9.5.1 – a few

participants suggested that students who undertake sound recording programmes<sup>37</sup> are more likely to compete for departmental resources than their peers. One potential explanation may relate to the collaborative working processes within these domains, as expressed by P7\_AcSM in relation to MASR students and acknowledged by existing research in relation to community music (Bowman, 2009; Koopman, 2007); in light of literature suggesting that collaborative practices represent a challenge for a competitive music education culture (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Lowe, 2018), it could be the case that students engaging in these specialisations are less inclined to compete with each other.

Several staff members believed that students' attitudes may be influenced by their perceptions of the institutional ethos. While some of them believed that the department's alignment with a largely traditional concept of western music education might induce students to perceive some areas as more prestigious and competitive than others (e.g. classical music performance), others deemed the departmental culture as not particularly competitive. This opinion supported a perception of students' attitudes within the department as marginally competitive; however, P5\_AcSM (see 9.4.2.1) was aligned with P2\_IVTs (Chapter 8) in their critical outlook towards the laid-back attitude that could result from university music departments where competition among students is far less present than in other tertiary-level institutions.

The effects that competition might have on students were also discussed by staff. Unsurprisingly, a number of participants focussed on both its potentially damaging and its motivating effects which may depend both on personal reactions to competitive situations and on the type of activities students compete for (see section 9.4.2). Some answers corroborated existing literature observing that these effects are generally determined by outcomes (Austin, 1988); thus, while the impact of a positive outcome (e.g. a successful audition for a seat in the orchestra) on students' motivation and wellbeing are self-evident, it may be relevant to discuss how to soften the effects of a negative outcome. In this regard, P3\_AcSM offered an interesting consideration about a record label that signed runners-up from national music contests, a decision that enabled the label to save money as signing finalists had a lower financial impact

---

<sup>37</sup> This includes undergraduate students enrolled in the Music and Sound Recording (MASR) BA degree as well as postgraduate students enrolled in the MA Music Production degree.

than signing winners and gave these musicians career prospects that were not dependent on the outcome of one competition. While these conclusions may not be directly relevant to the UoY Music Department as its educational and practical purposes are not equalled to those of musical contests, P3\_AcSM's comment may open up further reflections on the application of a flexible attitude towards competitive opportunities that are offered within the department. In particular, the negative outcomes of unsuccessful competitions (e.g. unsuccessful audition for a departmental ensemble) could be softened by promoting consistently those opportunities that are not built on the winner/loser dichotomy and, instead, value students' work by focussing on cooperative and creative aspects.

## **9.5 Aspects influencing competition in the UoY Music Department**

### *9.5.1 Aspects creating competition*

All participants claimed that feelings of competition were experienced by music students, at least to some extent. Some of them (n=3) mentioned the contact with peers of similar or higher abilities who all specialise in music and may include individuals of the same age who are further on in their skill development: 'you were probably the star of the class in your school and then you suddenly get to university and you realise that you're way down the list as there are bigger stars than you are' (P3\_AcSM). Another aspect mentioned by a few participants (n=3) was competition for funding, which applied particularly to research students. This opinion was interesting as four other participants did not consider PhD students as a particularly competitive category, for 'they're very much on their own things' (P13\_AdSM). Similarly, while three participants regarded composition as a domain where students tend to be relatively supportive of each other, some (n=4) acknowledged that aspects of competition related to composition opportunities may occur:

There's the contemporary ensemble calls for scores which goes out every term and composers are selected by the committee. [...] And then there are opportunities that arise on an ad-hoc basis, like opportunities to write for resident ensembles and guest artists who come in to workshop and



things like that, and pieces are selected for that. So I guess that's a sort of competitive process as well. (P4\_AcSM)

Lastly, a few participants acknowledged that student-run opportunities, work experience and placements as well as limited resource/equipment availability for sound recording students may also create competition. For example, in relation to a student-run composition performance ensemble P9\_AcSM suggested that these at times may prompt discussions among students regarding the competence of their peers who assess the compositions submitted.

Participants discussed more extensively aspects of competition as experienced by international students as compared to home students; postgraduate and undergraduate students; performance activities and assessments. Therefore, findings regarding these aspects are presented separately in the following sections.

#### *9.5.1.1 Postgraduate and undergraduate students; international students and home students*

Participants noticed some differences between feelings of competition as experienced by undergraduate and postgraduate students. Five of them observed that undergraduate students appeared to feel more in competition with each other and described them as 'more concerned about marks' (P8\_AcSM) or more inclined to compete with peers due to being taught in cross-year groups, creating a perception of belonging to a large cohort overall. P1\_AcSM reported that postgraduate students 'are often all going to be there for their own reasons and potentially be at a different stage of life, have done different things and have different experiences', resulting in this group being less inherently comparable than undergraduates. Other staff members reinforced this, acknowledging their perceptions of postgraduate students' possessing a self-focussed attitude which made them more inclined to compete with themselves than with their peers; P11\_AcSM stated: 'From my experiences at postgraduate performance level often the competition is internal and they're so worried about bettering themselves because they're at that level that they're doing a Master in performance'.

Differences related to feelings of competition were noted by several participants in relation to British and non-British students. Three staff members felt

unable to compare these students as they 'don't have a big enough sample size to call upon' (P7\_AcSM) while three others explicitly reported having observed higher perceptions of peer competition among international students; on a related note, more (n=6) believed that cultural differences may account for international students' presenting particular qualities with regard to adapting to the British educational system: 'it's no secret that China is a much more authoritarian country than England. So, Chinese students come in much more prepared to follow the rules, they're less likely to challenge me because they think it's disrespectful' (P3\_AcSM). Similarly, P6\_AcSM believed that international students carry forward their prior experience: 'Those students are bringing to the idea of competition in particular [...] whatever they know from their home prior experience. So, if they are in a very intensely competitive environment [...] that's what they expect'.

Four participants believed that international students appear to be less competitive than home students but provided opposite explanations for the reasons behind it. While P8\_AcSM thought that international students 'sometimes might struggle to basically just fulfil the absolute minimum requirements, so they are not really worried about their overall outcome and whether they're better than others', P10\_AcSM observed that non-British students raised in a competitive culture (e.g. European conservatoires) may not have natural competitors at the UoY Music Department and, thus, could feel less pressure from their peers:

They have definitely said to me that they feel that their conservatoire experience in Europe was more competitive than their experience of the York department, and they're probably right to some extent, [...] their position was a very different one. So, they were already coming in at a higher level than most of the other performers, so it's probably easier to say 'this is not so competitive', if you are quite clearly one of the best.

Lastly, only one participant made a specific differentiation between European and UK students, claiming that they did not notice any particular difference between European and British students in how they experience feelings of competition within the UoY Music Department.

### *9.5.2 Performance activities*

Ten participants regarded departmental performance activities as particularly competitive; P12\_AdSM suggested that 'anything to do with performance, people are very concerned to do well'. While a few members of staff felt that performers have a 'different attitude to [competition] than those who are not first and foremost performers' because 'within performance there always is some competitive spirit' (P5\_AcSM), many more (n=9) linked this high degree of competition with the visibility associated with performance: 'If you don't want to tell anyone else your marks nobody else will know them [...]. Whereas an orchestra or an ensemble is very visibly ranked by: you're first violin, you're a second violin, you're a soloist' (P2\_AcSM). Four participants believed that a high emotional investment in performance also played a part in making performance activities competitive. P10\_AcSM, in this regard, stated:

I think the other element – and I think this is inevitable – is that a lot of people feel more personally attached or they feel like they're putting themselves on the line when they perform, to some extent. You know, 'this is my interpretation of this piece, I have done all of this' as opposed to an undergraduate essay where you are supposed to be very clearly rehearsing other people's ideas and pulling them into a structure and showing an understanding, but not necessarily producing something that is so obviously in part a subjective response.

Among the departmental performance opportunities, participants believed that competitive feelings occurred particularly in relation to recitals (n=2) and ensemble or concerto auditions (n=6). In particular, the limited availability of some orchestral seats and of the concerto opportunities accounted for the perceived competitiveness of auditions: '[Competition is inevitable] particularly where there are lots of people who play a particular instrument and, with woodwind and brass, where there are only a few seats to fill' (P1\_AcSM). Nonetheless, P9\_AcSM pointed out that students may perceive some ensemble positions as more desirable than others and may inaccurately interpret the ensemble leader's recruitment choices:

This feeling that if they're not high up in the desks, they're not worthy of something [...] is not [true] because you need strong players throughout a string section from front to back. So, you need one of the strongest players at least on each desk. So that's not always appreciated.

Some participants thought that students' specialisation influenced their perceptions of competition; singers, in particular, were deemed by five participants as a particularly competitive category. P1\_AcSM associated higher levels of competition with the specificity of the instrument: 'I've always assumed that is a lot to do with the idea that when you're a singer, your instrument is your voice. So, it's unbelievably personal'. P10\_AcSM, however, thought that singers' attitudes to career prospects made them particularly competitive:

I think they feel that they're in the early stages of possibly a career, that it really matters if they're going to be selected to be in this choir or to get this solo. So, [they feel] that it's really important that this member of staff or this teacher likes their work as that might lead to future possibilities.

Two staff members also pointed out that non-music students' access to university orchestra auditions may also create competition among students. Lastly, three participants believed that some genres – classical music in particular – could be perceived by students as more competitive than others, for example in comparison with Early Music repertoire or folk music (P5\_AcSM).

### *9.5.3 Marks and assessments*

The majority of participants (n=12) believed that assessments may create feelings of competition among students. However, they had mixed views as to whether assessments were more likely to induce students to compete with each other to achieve the best mark (n=3), or to compete with themselves in relation to their own previous marks (n=3) or both (n=3). P9\_AcSM, for example, believed that resentment about different marks 'can lead to a little bit of tension between students' but also acknowledged that an 'individual competitive streak' at times is shown by students disappointed by their own mark who ask for further clarification of their mark and

feedback. P7\_AcSM believed that assessments may act as a driver for competition in application to the work produced by students rather than to the marks per se:

[Assessments] encourage a little bit of competition but encourage competition that has, I think, a really beneficial outcome. It has an outcome that pushes students to do the most interesting work, and I like the fact that [in this department] there is less of a focus on grades and marks generally. That's a really positive thing for students because it means that the focus is on what it should be on, which is the creative act of that [work]; the act of production, the critique of the intricacies of what they're doing.

Two participants believed that the assessment-driven culture experienced by students in UK schools was likely to have informed their strong focus on marks in higher education:

In this country, we start testing children at the age of four and they are tested throughout school in the most rigorous ways on Earth, and therefore no surprise at all when they arrive at university. Now they pay £9000 a year for the privilege of being here, and all they're interested is the mark they get, the degree they get at the end because they're customers.  
(P5\_AcSM)

Interestingly, P5\_AcSM and P7\_AcSM seem to express two contrasting views regarding the relationship between students' feelings toward marks and feedback; while P7\_AcSM seemed to consider marks and feedback slightly competitively but through a learning perspective, P5\_AcSM's observation suggested that that students' focus is geared towards the outcome represented by the marks they obtain. Several participants (n=6) also observed that students may also approach written feedback in a competitive manner, though to a lesser extent than marks:

Sometimes students read the feedback in the light of their already established sense of competitiveness and so they will [...] regard certain

things as fair or unfair in relation to their sense of how they are standing. Overall, I don't think it's nearly as strong as the more obvious mark is. (P10\_AcSM).

However, P10\_AcSM also added:

I think we put in place measures to try to make clear how things are as fair as possible in terms of the assessment procedures. I think there's been a lot of work in the time that I've been here to improve students' understanding of how their work is assessed, especially for recitals. [...] It's about their perception of fairness. And that presumably has a knock-on effect on the sense of competitiveness.

In this sense, it is relevant to notice that four staff members echoed P10\_AcSM in emphasising the time spent by the academic staff to justify marks through written feedback and 'make sure that [criticism] always comes across as constructive' (P5\_AcSM) which may have a positive effect on reducing students' potential negative reaction to their marks. Likewise, P8\_AcSM claimed that assessments and feedback being 'anonymous, confidential' did not foster peer comparison per se. Two other respondents echoed P8\_AcSM's statement by suggesting that it is students' choice to decide whether to disclose the marks and feedback they receive with peers; thus, the department's responsibility in fostering students' feelings of competition in relation to assessments is limited.

#### *9.5.4 Departmental opportunities that soften competition*

A few participants discussed how teaching modes and opportunities within the department may limit competition among students. In relation to teaching modes, one participant suggested that the online mode of delivery that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic may have helped students 'remov[ing competition] because you don't have the direct comparison' (P2\_AcSM). P1\_AcSM, instead, highlighted how ensembles such as the Gamelan ensemble, defined as 'far more democratic and free-flowing', perhaps due to the lack of audition and conductor-less mode of direction, may de-emphasise students' sense of competition as compared to the Symphony

Orchestra where roles are established following an audition process. Similarly, P12\_AcSM noted that the variety of departmental vocal ensembles provides opportunities for all singers; in particular, they believed that having both highly selective ensembles and student-run ones that students can join without audition reduced competition among singers in the last few years:

Because there were like 80 singers in [staff-led vocal ensemble I] who all wanted opportunities but then just the favoured few would get little solo bits there was a lot of bad feeling, and that's why I think the [staff-led vocal ensemble II] helped because people then who were not as good as some of the others realised they'd never get into that ensemble because it was so hard and so good. And now with [new student-run ensemble] which they've made voluntary, I think people are loving being in that. And they are happy about it, they have ownership, maybe.

Lastly, three participants believed that departmental culture enabled students to form a close-knit community, favoured by the relatively small size of both the department and the city of York (P8\_AcSM) as well as by the undergraduate project system teaching mode (see 3.6.1). Interestingly, staff members again had diverse opinions on the effects of this close community on students' perceptions of competition within the department; P9\_AcSM and P7\_AcSM believed that 'the competition there is lessened' (P9\_AcSM) by students being close and supporting each other; conversely, P8\_AcSM observed that in situations where 'everyone knows each other, then obviously [students] might be more competitive against each other'.

In light of the multifaceted aspects that participants indicated as concurring to fuel or soften competitive feelings within the UoY Music Department, mixed/opposed views are not surprising; indeed, competitive feelings relating to students' social life, attitudes to performance, marks and feedback connect to other individual elements including attitude and personal characteristics, instrumental specialisation, staff specialism and the contexts in which they work with students, personal backgrounds and culture.

### *9.5.5 Discussion: Aspects influencing competition in the UoY Music*

#### *Department*

Participants observed that feelings of competition could occur among students within the UoY Music Department in multiple circumstances. Some of their beliefs regarding how competition is experienced by students were similar to those of IVTs (Chapter 8); for example, some staff members acknowledged that the transition from high school to university as well as the existence of a close community of peers within the department – despite a lack of consensus on its effects (see section 9.5.4) – may have implications for students' perceptions of competition.

Furthermore, most of them regarded performance activities as generally more competitive than others, including composition or sound recording (see section 9.5.2), and emphasised how visibility and emotional investment contribute to make performance-related feelings of competition particularly intense. While, unsurprisingly, several staff members suggested that recitals and auditions may embed competitive elements, it is interesting that one participant (P9\_AcSM) reported that students at times read those choices made by staff in relation to auditions in an unnecessarily competitive way; as noted in 9.5.2, this participant reported that some students might mistakenly believe that desk allocations in the orchestras are arranged in order of skills and ability, while the conductor actually needs 'one of the strongest players at least on each desk' (P9\_AcSM). This observation indicates that students may not be aware of the organisational structure of an orchestra. Such lack of awareness might be rooted in limited exposure to orchestral settings in secondary school due to the progressive funding cuts to music departments in public schools (Bath et al., 2020) or, alternatively, in hierarchical school environments where students did not have the opportunity to ask their teachers for clarification (Brophy, 2006). Either way, as P12\_AdSM claimed 'if they're not told, they'll never know'; therefore, it may be speculated that clearer communication regarding seat allocations could help students gain a better understanding of the orchestral organisation and, potentially, feel less competitive with peers in this context. In contrast with the competitiveness related to auditions, the wide range of available ensembles was perceived by some participants as a deterrent of competition. In this regard, one participant observed that the non-



hierarchical structure of the Gamelan ensemble<sup>38</sup> as compared to more western ensemble settings such as the Symphony Orchestra may deter a competitive approach in favour of a collaborative one (Tan et al., 2021).

Another aspect that participants believed fosters competitive feelings within the UoY Music Department related to assessments and marks. Some staff members believed that home students were raised in a strongly assessment-driven educational culture in the UK, an opinion that is also evidenced by existing studies (Smith & Holloway, 2020). While students' inclination to compare marks with each other or with their own previous marks may not be surprising, several participants reported being very careful in 'justifying the mark' through feedback and alignment with marking criteria (P2\_AcSM). Careful mark justification through alignment with marking criteria provides students with a clearer picture of 'the grounds on which the evaluator reasons towards an evaluative conclusion/judgement' (Dickinson & Adams, 2017, p. 113) and is likely to encourage students to focus on the feedback they received in order to understand how to improve their work (Chowdhury, 2019); however, it may be questioned whether there are any further implications on students' perceptions of competition. Marking criteria induce students to produce work based on the descriptors as close alignment with these criteria is likely to grant them higher marks. These works may therefore be more immediately comparable and generate competitive behaviours, for similarity could produce competition (Garcia et al., 2013). On the other hand, P7\_AcSM's statement about MASR students' competitive feelings being oriented towards the creativity of their work rather than marks (section 9.5.3) seems to suggest that marking criteria may not be crucial for students across all contexts; instead, the working culture of different musical specialisations and their relationship with creativity may play a more influential role in determining higher levels of competition towards assessments.

Assessment-related competition seemed to have been perceived as being experienced differently by MASR students, who were believed by some participants to compete more for resources, as they need specialised equipment and dedicated studio

---

<sup>38</sup> Despite being of great interest for pedagogical purposes and for music education more broadly, a discussion on the influence of Gamelan ensembles on western music learning cultures is outside the scope of this research. However, a relevant insight into this topic was provided by Neil Sorrell in his 1990 book *A guide to the gamelan*, published by Faber & Faber.

spaces are limited. For example, students who want to carry out their recording assessments in the department's two concert halls – which are coveted spaces due to their acoustic properties – often have to do that outside office hours (e.g. very late in the evening or early in the morning) as, in addition to the concert series (see 3.6.4), there tends to be a high demand for these spaces throughout the year and MASR students typically need long consecutive booking slots to achieve their recording assessments. As a result, these students may feel hierarchically in a lower position in comparison with other undergraduate students (more details will be given in section 9.6.1).

Students' diverse trajectories were deemed by participants to foster different feelings of competition regarding a number of other aspects. Undergraduate students were considered as a generally more competitive category than postgraduate students. While undergraduates may be more comparable due to demographic similarities and objectives (see section 9.5.1.1), it is worth noting that some students' decision to further their education after their bachelor degree may go beyond the brighter income prospects that might result from having a postgraduate degree (Altonji et al., 2016; Lindley & Machin, 2016) and relate to their experience in undergraduate education; as suggested by Boneva et al. (2022), students' expectations of postgraduate courses are informed by their experiences as undergraduate students. Therefore, it may be the case that postgraduate students are more likely to have had a positive experience of competition in their undergraduate years or feel ready to deal with it and, therefore, appear as a less competitive category of students.

Participants had mixed opinions about the competitiveness of non-British students; a few staff members deemed them as more competitive than home students (n=3) while a similar number held the opposite view (n=4). Participants' beliefs regarding the critical influence of educational culture rather than nationality on these students' approach to competition was of interest for this research. P10\_AcSM's comment regarding some former non-British students (see section 9.5.1.1) suggested that progression from European conservatoires may position some performance-oriented students as being more skilled and confident; therefore, they would not perceive the UoY Music Department as challenging to their confidence, which could be confirmed by research addressing a high level of self-efficacy for musical learning among conservatoire students (Ritchie & Williamon, 2010). However, P8\_AcSM's

opposite conclusions on international students' lower capabilities to 'fulfil the absolute minimum requirements' may suggest that exposure to diverse educational cultures have a different impact on students' ability to compete for the highest marks. Nonetheless, while P10\_AcSM made a clear reference to performance-oriented students, P8\_AcSM did not provide further details on the type of specialisation they were referring to; therefore, a more nuanced explanation would be that different educational cultures may provide students with different sets of skills whose successful application depends on the specialisation. Performance excellence, for example, does not necessarily involve the high standard of familiarity with English academic writing that is the case for other music-related subjects that involve essay writing (e.g. musicology); therefore, while limited exposure to academic writing in English may penalise international students in some respects, this would not be the case in performance-oriented matters. Comments from both P8\_AcSM and P10\_AcSM, however, indicated that the educational culture to which students had been exposed played a more critical role than nationality, a statement supported by literature focussing on the influence of educational culture on higher music education students (Brand, 2001; Leong, 2010; Petersen & Camp, 2016).

Lastly, in light of the high concentration of international students in the postgraduate cohort, the observation made by a few participants that non-British students are more competitive than their British peers may seem in contrast with the perception of postgraduate students as less competitive. Nonetheless, it may be the case that competitive feelings among non-British students are less evident due to international students' reticence to share issues and concerns (Sit, 2013), particularly in consideration of the relatively short amount of time – one year – that postgraduate taught students (who comprise the majority of international students in the department) have to adjust to the UK higher education culture.

## 9.6 Perception of the UoY Music Department institutional culture

### 9.6.1 Considerations of institutional culture related to competition in the UoY Music Department

Many participants (n=11) claimed that the UoY Music Department institutional culture is not significantly geared towards competition. P5\_AcSM, for example, believed that the department does not offer 'loads of competitions' beyond prizes that are assigned to undergraduate students at the end of the year, and deemed these as 'not [the] sort of things that you compete for'. Furthermore, P12\_AdSM stated that they received fewer complaints from students about favouritism, which may indicate that staff have become more aware of the importance of dealing as fairly as possible with students. Similarly, P9\_AcSM did not see a 'poisonous culture of competition' around the department and three staff members regarded the flexibility offered by the department through the project system<sup>39</sup> as a useful tool to reduce feelings of competition among students. P6\_AcSM's opinion is of particular interest, focusing on how the project system may help provide opportunities for individuals from very different socioeconomic backgrounds:

York is a better institution than some in terms of providing opportunities that rich kids are not necessarily going to be good at. You know, if you come in and you're singing arias from the Baroque period and you weren't rich, that's a very, very unusual circumstance. Your family had to have enough money for you to learn this music to get a voice teacher and to go to concerts, right? But York has always tried to have courses in Ethnomusicology or Popular music or whatever. We haven't been as good as some places, but we've been better than others.

On the other hand, P6\_AcSM was also concerned that the department may not be able to 'accommodate the [project] system' in the future in light of the UK higher education progressively heading towards the American model of the semester system, deemed

---

<sup>39</sup> Details on the flexibility of the project system have been provided in Chapter 3, section 3.6.1.

by this participant as intensively competitive. A few other participants also acknowledged features of the UoY Music Department that may exacerbate competition among students; in particular, three of them believed that the department tends to prioritise some specialisations over others, which was particularly evident in relation to performance activities and classical music over other genres: 'There are still structures within the department that align with that historical hierarchy and the prioritisation of performance over other activities' (P2\_AcSM); as a consequence, P2\_AcSM suggested that an additional hierarchy may be perceived by students enrolled in the MASR course as they face the challenge of finding their own place within the department: 'there is a bit of a divide, since the MASR course is new and is trying to fit itself around the BA Music course rather than it being an equal weighting'.

### *9.6.2 Discussion: Perception of the UoY Music Department institutional culture*

Participants provided useful insights about the connection between competitive stances and the institutional culture of the UoY Music Department. While all participants acknowledged that students are likely to encounter some form of competitive feelings (see section 9.5.1), many believed that competition was not openly encouraged by the department nor generally experienced in an unhealthy manner. For example, one participant believed that undergraduate prizes were not interpreted in a competitive sense by students, which may be partly explained with prizes' lower visibility and students' limited emotional investment in them as compared to performance activities. Furthermore, it may be speculated that the staff's approach towards prizes influences students' attitudes; as P5\_AcSM reported, 'we don't sort of flip prizes for them to fight over'. In this sense, students' attitude towards competition seems directly influenced by the staff, indicating staff members' awareness of their key role in contributing to the institutional culture of this setting.

Another aspect that facilitated a non-intensively competitive culture was the flexibility of the project system. Remarkably, P6\_AcSM outlined that this specific attribute might diminish existing socioeconomic disparities between higher education students as expressed by current literature (Richardson et al., 2020), by offering

opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds; thus, those who may not have had the opportunity at school to focus on a particular domain may find their niche in another musical area thanks to the range of available projects. Nonetheless, concerns expressed by P6\_AcSM regarding higher education shifting towards a more competitive model are widely documented by literature, either in relation to rankings (Brankovic et al., 2018) or to those challenges posed by globalised higher education (Mohrman et al., 2008) and may be justified; indeed, negotiating the flexibility of a diversified musical offer – as expressed by the project system – with the pressure deriving from adaptation to an increasingly competitive educational setting may become a challenge that music departments are likely to face in the near future.

While, as stated above, the diversity of the project system may reduce competitive feelings among students, other participants argued that the UoY Music Department tended to prioritise some domains over others. It is not possible, from the data presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to determine conclusively whether students share a similar view, but it could be speculated that such perception of a hierarchical understanding of different musical domains has the potential to impact students' feelings of competition; therefore, activities perceived by students to be prioritised by staff may be judged by students as particularly prestigious or attractive, pushing them to compete with themselves or with their peers to be successful.

Lastly, several participants' answers outlined positive developments in the UoY Music Department's support provision, which seems to reflect an enhanced attentiveness towards issues of diversity (see section 9.7.5) and parity. In particular, P12\_AdSM's comment regarding not receiving many complaints about favouritism could relate to the adoption of transparent and open procedures in relation to ensembles, auditions and marking, and concern with parity in respect of access to facilities, opportunities and support for all students.

## **9.7 Mental wellbeing and support provision**

### *9.7.1 Impact of competition on mental wellbeing*

During the interviews participants discussed the relationship between competition and students' wellbeing. Eight of them felt that students' wellbeing may be affected by competitive feelings; for example, P10\_AcSM observed that judgement may feed into

feelings of competition and wellbeing, and students who 'take that very much to heart' may find it problematic 'not measuring up or to be strongly criticised'. On a different note, P8\_AcSM was aware that 'there are students struggling with mental health, and I know it's linked to their assessments and submissions and the requirements of the things that we demand from them'; aspects connected to Music Performance Anxiety and pressure to deliver were also mentioned by other participants as potentially affecting students' wellbeing. Three participants, however, believed that while competition may impact students' wellbeing, other pressing aspects may contribute to wellbeing deterioration, including deeply rooted issues (P6\_AcSM) or, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic (P12\_AdSM).

Five participants observed that competition may also exert an indirect positive influence on students' wellbeing, particularly in relation to enhanced motivation or developing excellence. In this regard, P2\_AcSM stated:

[My students and I] did have also some really interesting conversations about 'well, if you don't have competition, how did you get excellence?' which is something I've struggled with myself in terms of 'well, you can't do away with competition because if you do away with competition, then we won't keep striving for excellence'. And there were really good conversations about that, with some people saying that actually, performance goals have their place, competition has its place.

Unlike other participants, P12\_AdSM claimed that music itself may have a therapeutic effect on students' wellbeing:

We are always thinking about all the pressure and the tension and the anxiety and competitiveness and all of that stuff that we as musicians go through but actually, there's another side to it, apparently, that we can also help ourselves by having this something that we love so much, whereas other people who don't have that, may think 'I've got nothing to fall back on, I suppose, or nothing to help ourselves with this'.

Consequently, P12\_AdSM believed that music students may be in a favourable place in comparison with other students, as pressures derived from operating in a competitive environment could be mitigated by their personal involvement in music making.

### *9.7.2 Support systems*

13 participants held a generally positive view of the support provided by the UoY Music Department to students, and regarded its atmosphere as 'pleasant and positive' because 'everybody's really trying hard to be very friendly and supportive' (P8\_AcSM). Furthermore, most participants felt supported by the department, for they had relevant points of contact to discuss students' wellbeing concerns (n=4), access to valuable training (n=2), and new mental health specialists recently began a regular collaboration with the department (n=2). P14\_AdSM, for example, claimed: 'staff have had more training, there are [staff] mental health first aiders, so they've had more training. So there's more access than there would have been years ago'. Interestingly, two administrative staff members also focussed on how the physical characteristics of their offices both in terms of a visible physical position within the department (P13\_AdSM) and space quality (P14\_AdSM) may encourage students to speak to them: 'I'm lucky in that I have my own office, so I think having space is very important when you're offering advice and information' (P14\_AdSM).

All participants believed their role to be of particular importance in terms of being available to students who may need support. While AcSM have a duty of care towards students, administrators 'don't have any kind of contractual [obligation], it's not in [their] job description' (P14\_AdSM); however, all of the administrator participants regarded support provision as an important part of their job. P12\_AdSM, in particular, stated: 'I would say that I'm always there to help and ready to listen and I would do that above anything else if a student wants to talk about something. I think it's very important to be available'.

Academic staff participants also provided details of how they fulfilled their pastoral care duties; in particular, nine of them regarded being available to talk to students as hugely important. P4\_AcSM, for example, believed that staff members fulfil their pastoral duties by 'being available if the students need us, if they need to talk to us and by, as supervisors, being a non-academic point of contact for the students', while P2\_AcSM reported having 'a heightened sense of awareness and



responsibility to all students regardless of whether I'm their personal supervisor'. Four staff members reported experiences of encouraging students to focus on their own work rather than comparing with each other, while the importance of signposting was acknowledged by five participants: 'one of our big jobs is just signposting people to, you know, this service or this website or this person, whatever it might be to help students get the support they need at that point' (P7\_AcSM). Lastly, four participants observed that staff attentiveness towards how opportunities are provided may also help students downplay feelings of competition: P13\_AdSM reported being very careful about not circulating information about external competitions that require students to pay a high fee or where they may have 'a low chance of winning', while P12\_AdSM believed that the conductor of the Symphony Orchestra 'tries to make [things] as fair as possible' by 'mov[ing] people around and some people might not get in one term, they'll get in another term'.

### *9.7.3 Suggestions for further actions*

Several participants believed that students' experiences may benefit from the department taking further steps to reduce competitive attitudes or to discuss issues of competition. Seven staff members thought that more discussions about competition may be valuable; P1\_AcSM stated:

Having more regular things like that where there's opportunities to talk about these ideas about competition [would be beneficial] because I'm aware that a lot of people probably don't talk about it and because of that may well feel that they are alone with their feelings.

Similarly, P11\_AcSM believed that it would be 'good to talk about it, to be aware of it, to recognise it in its different forms and to get different perspectives in how it links to things like mental health and how to get support'. These two participants (P1\_AcSM and P11\_AcSM) also claimed that more training for staff to deal with students' wellbeing concerns could prove useful; indeed, P11\_AcSM observed that staff members have different attitudes towards pastoral care as some of them 'are perhaps less confident or comfortable with that aspect of the role ... I don't feel like I've had any training in that aspect'.

Six participants believed that a cultural change both in relation to higher education policies and within the department could also prove beneficial for students. For example, two participants questioned the 'dominance of the testing culture' within higher education as 'when [assessments] become dominant and become the only reason [students] are here, that is a real problem' (P5\_AcSM). Two other staff members, instead, advocated for an increased emphasis on health and wellbeing within the department; in particular, P2\_AcSM thought that 'if you want to see real change, [modules on health and wellbeing] need to be seen as integral'. Conversely, two participants were not sure that further support would benefit students: 'I think you can overload students with information and we might be at the point now where we've got enough places for students to be signposted to' (P13\_AdSM).

### *9.7.3.1 Diversity*

Two participants emphasised the relevance of increased specialisation diversity in potentially softening competition. P10\_AcSM deemed the UoY Music Department to be excessively rooted in a 'conventional ideas of concerts and recitals', believing that students tend to offer standardised ideas of performance programmes; this facilitates comparison among them. Instead, encouraging 'diversity of musical practices' may make their recital/audition programmes less comparable and, consequently, could inhibit competition:

Some students are absolutely convinced that they really need to do a baroque piece, a classical piece, a romantic piece or whatever, a kind of very conventional idea of a recital. But the more they feel 'this is my event and I can shape it and I can make it what I want, and perhaps I don't even have to do it in the Concert Hall, maybe I could do it in the other Auditorium', or even somewhere else... The more they have agency in that, the more diverse they are, the more creativity comes in. And then perhaps that mitigates a little bit against competition because actually when they're doing things that are more different, they're less comparable in certain respects.

P6\_AcSM also believed that diversity of programmes may mitigate competition but

conceptualised it in relation to the broader community of musicians. In particular, they believed that the opportunities opened up by the internet may enable musicians to gain levels of ultra-specialisation which could make competition 'almost kind of irrelevant':

[The playing field has] become much more specialised in a sense, because you have the opportunity to differentiate yourself more clearly from everybody else; so, huge amount of people have developed their own websites, will develop their own modes of self-presentation. [...]. So I may play the Baroque violin and there may be 400,000 people around the world who play the Baroque violin but I play it differently because I play French Canadian fiddle music on it, how about that? Ok, can you equal that? Well, yeah, it turns out there's a couple of people in Canada already doing that so I will specialise in the French Canadian music from North-western Quebec! All right, got it! That's my website, I am the world authority. There is no competition! That sounds crazy but it's not crazy and that is happening, people are doing exactly that.

Consequently, ultra-specialisation was believed by P6\_AcSM to have a double effect: on the one hand, it increases diversity within a musician's professional identity; on the other, such a high level of individual specialisation is likely to produce less room for competition among musicians.

#### *9.7.4 Limitations to support provision*

Several participants (n=8) identified limitations to departmental support provision. Five of them acknowledged themselves as not to be qualified as mental health professionals; P11\_AcSM was 'very aware that we aren't trained in mental health and so I think the limits of it have to be recognised because it can be dangerous if we think that we can give professional medical advice'. Three participants made general comments on the challenges of finding a balance between the competitive reality of the professional world and the provision of adequate support to students; P4\_AcSM, for example, stated:

It's up to us to find a positive and nurturing way in which to introduce the aspect of competition into the learning process, into the developmental process, because if you have a traumatic first experience of competition, then it's going to be very hard to move beyond that and find a way to deal with it in real professional life in general.

P2\_AcSM, instead, regarded the slowness of cultural change as a potential barrier to the implementation of a pedagogical culture that is highly attentive to musicians' health and wellbeing. They believed that students often had a limited understanding of the workload, which may have made them inconsiderate of the staff's time:

I think students quite honestly have absolutely no concept of what a staff workload is. [...]. So, all they see is 'that's my tutor, that's my project leader. Therefore, they belong to me, their time is mine' and actually I have to make it very clear to my students that I have other commitments. And it is really hard to maintain the sense of parity across all of them to be that mentally available for all of the ones who are really struggling with their confidence, self-esteem and the very real problems that many of them are facing particularly at the moment.

Conversely, P5\_AcSM 'wish[ed] students would make more of [my pastoral role]' and, thus, identified a hurdle in some students' reluctance to make the most of academic staff's pastoral duties. Lastly, four participants observed reluctance among international students to discuss their feelings of competition: 'I think international students would never admit that they were feeling unhappy or failing during competition. I just don't think they would do it' (P14\_AdSM). Likewise, in relation to Chinese students P3\_AcSM echoed: 'it's very difficult if they have any emotional or mental health difficulties with it: it's a long while before that emerges because they're not a particularly demonstrative culture'. Therefore, it may be the case that international students' potential feelings of competition are not as visible to staff members as those of home students. In light of this consideration, P3\_AcSM and P14\_AdSM's observations that non-British students may at times need more dedicated support is unsurprising.

### *9.7.5 Discussion: Mental wellbeing and support provision*

Several participants' thoughts on the influence of competitive feelings on students' wellbeing aligned with a conceptualisation of such influence as positive, negative, or both. While the negative aspects were already mentioned by some students and IVTs (Chapters 6, 7, 8) and include Music Performance Anxiety and external judgement, some participants' observations of competition's positive influence were more original. One participant (P12\_AdSM) believed that music students may have an advantage in dealing with wellbeing related issues in comparison with students from other faculties, for their emotional investment in musical activities may act as a powerful enabler of wellbeing; the positive relationship between music and wellbeing has been widely reviewed by MacDonald et al. (2012). Nonetheless, these therapeutic effects of music may depend on students' individual interests and whether they feel supported within the department. For example, students who enjoy engaging with some repertoire (e.g. popular contemporary piano music) might not feel supported in their choice either within their peer group or by staff members if that repertoire does not align with standardised curricular requirements. Therefore, music could cease to act as a wellbeing enabler and may actually produce the opposite effect if students experience pressure to engage with expectations that do not align with their musical interests.

The support systems provided by the department and, more broadly, the University of York were also discussed. Participants generally held a positive opinion of the support systems in place and were also personally committed to provide support through signposting and to promote a healthy approach to competition (see section 9.7.2) which seems to reflect a trend of enhanced attentiveness towards wellbeing issues in UK higher education (Streatfield, 2019).

Some administrative staff members' observations regarding the connection between students' wellbeing issues and provision of individual office space in the department is of interest; indeed, their proximity to the entrance of one of the department's buildings could play a role in making them a visible point of contact for students and their daily 9-5 office presence in the department during weekdays might also contribute to such perception. Another aspect to consider relates to their more neutral position towards students as compared to academic staff, as administrators

are involved neither in teaching delivery nor in the assessment process. In alignment with literature highlighting administrators' 'unrecognised role in providing pastoral support' (Houghton, 2019, p. 126), it may be speculated that both their physical presence and role within the department contribute to make them a point of contact for students; indeed, it is not surprising that all three participating administrators felt responsible for departmental wellbeing provision despite not having contractual obligations to engage with that role.

Despite a generally positive evaluation of the support systems in place, several participants saw potential to further address competition-related issues and provide support, particularly in relation to having more discussions about competition, enhanced wellbeing based training for staff and promoting a less test-based culture (see section 9.7.3). Nonetheless, participants acknowledged practical barriers to the implementation of further measures to promote wellbeing, particularly in terms of staff workload, negotiation of the competitive reality of the music industry with the promotion of a wellbeing oriented culture in higher music education and the general slowness of change (see section 9.7.4). It is also worth noting that the promotion of a less test-based culture within universities, which are dominated by a culture of measurement, might not be realistic; therefore, it would be worth reflecting on how to negotiate competitive feelings associated with assessments with the necessity to provide students with valuable learning experiences that go beyond such competitiveness.

Interestingly, two participants focussed on the promotion of diversity as a tool for limiting competition within the UoY Music Department, specifically by encouraging students to embrace diverse repertoire that moves beyond conventional curricula (see section 9.7.3.1). While a plurality of repertoire certainly supports a welcomed multicultural context, diversity in music education cannot be bounded by a mere categorisation of these new practices; as noted by Kallio et al. (2021), the practical negotiation of diversity intended as 'assign meaning to difference' (p. 2) implies a wider reflection on how relations of power can be transformed and shifted by including new musical practices. Some students might want to engage with diverse repertoire, but the reception of this repertoire as equally valuable and meaningful as the classical canon is a necessary condition for achieving diversity. In this sense, a practical example of the difficulties in achieving diversity was evidenced by P14\_AdSM:

I just remember [two lecturers] assessing a musical theatre performance and I was in that room, they weren't interested. And that's an unconscious thing, I'm sure they did their best to be fair. But the difference when a classical singer came on was clear.

Furthermore, as suggested above, it may be questioned whether peers would also view different repertoire as equally valuable. Therefore, while enhanced diversity could be a powerful tool to reduce competitive stances among students in music education, its realisation involves an inclusive reconsideration of the connections between core curricula and diverse musical practices.

## **9.8 Perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department in relation to professional musical careers**

### *9.8.1 Competition within the music industry*

Most participants regarded the music industry as particularly competitive (n=11), but held different views on the competitiveness of different musical careers. Some of them (n=5) regarded auditions for professional orchestras and, more broadly, performance careers as particularly competitive. Other professional areas considered particularly competitive by participants were music-related academic research (n=2), music teaching (n=2), music production and recording (n=1).

More broadly, some participants observed that the process of applying for a job in itself is inherently competitive: 'in certain situations I think it's very explicit and I keep going back to it, auditioning for an orchestra or applying for a research position or applying for a teaching position' (P11\_AcSM). Therefore, it is unsurprising that six participants believed the department has a responsibility to prepare students for the competitiveness of the music industry; as P4\_AcSM suggested, 'The industry itself is competitive. And so to fail to prepare students for that, I think, would be to do them a disservice because the world is what it is'. On a slightly different note, P1\_AcSM believed that the main function of education is not to prepare students for the competitiveness of the professional

world; however, 'it would be misleading for people to step out into an ultra-competitive professional environment and to not have some experience of that'.

A few participants also discussed students' access to the music industry. P6\_AcSM's opinion was of particular interest, for they observed that students' necessity to compete within the job market is dependent on their socioeconomic status: 'the first factor about determining whether a student feels obliged to be competitive professionally is whether they need to be competitive professionally, whether the bread on the table depends on them being competitive'. Wealthier students may not feel compelled to compete as 'they have money, they can be an amateur. They can be a dilettante and the world loves them for it, possibly if they're very talented amateur or very eccentric dilettante' (P6\_AcSM). Lastly, two participants identified potential challenges in providing international students with the skills needed to face the challenges of the job market:

The Chinese students are going back to China, and the culture of all the international students that come to this department is probably the most different to the United Kingdom. [...] they're going back to their country and you have to be careful that you're not giving them an alien culture that's not going to work in China because community music is very new there and in a sense they've got to compete for attention from the authorities to make a case for what China views as new. (P3\_AcSM)

Therefore, these participants seemed particularly considerate of how the type of educational offer students experience within the UoY Music Department and, more broadly, in the UK, may relate to their students' post-education aims and goals.

### *9.8.2 Discussion: Perceptions of competitiveness in relation to professional musical careers*

In alignment with instrumental/vocal teachers' opinions<sup>40</sup>, most staff members regarded the music industry as competitive and believed that the UoY Music Department has a responsibility to prepare students for this competitiveness.

---

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 8, section 8.8.1.



Nonetheless, while IVTs mainly referred to performance careers, answers from staff members embedded a number of other domains including teaching, recording, production, and research as competitive. This broader perspective is likely to mirror staff members' wider specialisms beyond performance and opens up reflections on the relationship between gaining a music degree and music students' employability. Students' diversification of career prospects supports the value of a music degree, which is particularly far-reaching in consideration of the transferable skills that students acquire (e.g. management and communication skills) and make them competitive within non-music specific industries (Minors et al., 2017).

A few participants observed that students' access to the music industry was intertwined with competitive elements; in particular, P6\_AcSM's observation that music students' necessity to compete for a job within the music industry is highly dependent on their backgrounds is evidenced by literature outlining that those students from a higher socioeconomic background (e.g. students who are not the first generation of their family to go to university, students who attended private schools) are more likely to 'access career-enhancing employment opportunities during their studies' (Boneva et al., 2022, p. 13). Furthermore, Boneva et al. (2022) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to take up non-music related work during their study to cover their living costs. Despite the limited extent of music-industry specific research, the impact of socioeconomic backgrounds on higher education students' levels of attainment has been well-established within the literature (Azhar et al., 2014, Battle & Lewis, 2002; Gelbgiser, 2018), and it could be speculated that students who work during their studies are likely to have less time to spend on their degree; thus, this may have a negative impact on the acquisition of both specific and transferable skills that make music students more competitive within the industry.

Finally, a few participants discussed how best the department could prepare international students, and in particular Chinese students, for the competitiveness of the job market within their home country, which is where most of them will return to look for work. Thus, students' negotiation of the educational offer of the UoY Music Department in relation to the potential demands of a foreign music industry may require consideration by the staff and, more broadly, policy makers within the

university, particularly in light of the numbers of international students who are likely to return to their home country after completing their studies in the UK.

## 9.9 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the views of 14 academic and administrative staff members working in the UoY Music Department at the time of the data collection in relation to music students' perceptions of competition. Several staff members contextualised their views regarding competition; they acknowledged the partiality of their individual experiences and circumscribed this to their duties, responsibilities and communication with students. Some participants described competition in higher music education as inevitable, which aligned their views with those of several instrumental and vocal teachers (see Chapter 8). However, staff members seemed to adopt a more neutral position towards competition as compared to IVTs, many of whom referred to competition as a necessary evil; for example, as reported in 9.4.1, P10\_AcSM believed that competition intended as external judgement on musicians' works is a prerequisite for music to exist as an art form and, therefore, it inevitably has a place in higher music education.

Other participants believed that competition in higher music education may support the development of excellence, even though Bucura (2020) noted that such excellence is usually categorised within a traditional western classical music curriculum that acts as a standard of excellence for all students. This classification of excellence may be problematic in that by not providing alternative platforms of equal value it is exclusionary of those students whose interests lay outside this traditional curriculum. For example, students' perceptions of competition in relation to marks – acknowledged by most staff members – may at least partially be interpreted in this sense; beyond the more obvious level of competition represented by mark comparison (e.g. students choosing to share their marks with each other), marking criteria entail a standardised, yet promoting fairness, set of conditions that students have to align their work to in order to achieve a high mark, which implies limited opportunities to gain academic recognition that deviates from standardised criteria. The institutional ethos, however, might play an important role in influencing students' attitude to competition and excellence; while some participants regarded the ethos of the UoY Music

Department as rooted in a traditional conceptualisation of music that prioritises performance and, more specifically, classical music performances over other musical activities, other staff members referred to the flexibility represented by the project system as an example of a wide range of opportunities offered to students that embrace meaningful activities other than classical music performance. In this light, the implementation of diverse musical practices as suggested by two participants (see section 9.7.3.1), could act as a tool to promote a wider inclusion of the student body in varied musical activities. Furthermore, some participants acknowledged that individual staff attitudes towards competition may influence those of students.

In relation to other aspects that may influence students' perceptions of competition, staff members were aligned with the other categories participating in this research – students and IVTs – in outlining the high competitiveness of performance activities as well as the exposure and visibility that come with these. Participants also observed that different categories of students may have different feelings of competition. While sound recording students' feelings of competition were deemed as oriented towards competition for resources and facilities within the department, other undergraduate students were generally deemed more competitive than their postgraduate peers. Most interestingly, though, staff members had mixed views in relation to the competitiveness of international students, which have been well indicated by the different views held by P8\_AcSM and P10\_AcSM (see section 9.5.1.1), where P10\_AcSM believed that exposure to a different cultural context (European conservatoires) provided some performance students with a good level of confidence that was not challenged by the competitive dynamics of the UoY Music Department, but P8\_AcSM thought that international students are not adequately prepared to achieve academically as much as their British peers. It may be speculated that both these views are rooted in the specificities of students' specialisation; while proficiency in the English language inevitably plays a relevant role in academic-based specialisations, it does not play such an important role in performance and, consequently, international students could feel more equipped to compete in this field where language-related differences are less relevant.

Staff members also offered their views regarding the relationship between students' competitive feelings and mental wellbeing. Most of them recognised the twofold effect – positive and negative – that competitive feelings may have on

students' wellbeing. Furthermore, they generally regarded the support services offered by the institution as effective and acknowledged a general trend of enhanced quality and dissemination of these services. In terms of support, a particularly important role was played by administrators, due to the physical position of their offices, regular presence and neutrality in relation to students (see section 9.7.5), and one staff member acknowledged the therapeutic effect of music as a specific tool for music students to deal with competitive feelings. A few participants believed that further training could be provided for staff to enable them to support students and one participant advocated for a less test-based culture, even though its implementation within a higher music education setting may be unrealistic.

Participants also discussed the relationship between students' competitive feelings and musical careers. Rather unsurprisingly, most participants deemed musical careers as competitive and believed that the department has a responsibility to prepare students for such competitiveness. As suggested by P3\_AcSM (see section 9.8.1), this may be particularly challenging with regard to international students, as most of them will be entering the job market of their own country which may or may not align with the skills and competences acquired by students within the UoY Music Department. Some other differences among students pertain to their socio-economic background; students from a wealthier background are more likely to have access to brighter career prospects and have more time to focus on their studies (e.g. less need to work during their studies); thus, such context may enable them to compete for career opportunities in a better position compared to their peers. In conclusion, this poses questions as to whether higher education institutions may play a role in levelling up these differences; in particular, equipping the student body with skills that contribute to mitigate these differences could be of vital importance in a progressively more competitive global context where more and more individuals compete for a restricted number of job positions.

# **Chapter 10: General discussion**

## **10.1 Introduction**

This research aimed to explore the multifaceted aspects in which perceptions of competition experienced by university music students manifest themselves in one UK music department. Previous research has investigated, albeit not primarily, how music students experience feelings of competition in diverse contexts including schools, conservatoires (Williamon & Thompson, 2006; Casanova et al., 2018), varied higher education institutions (Papageorgi et al., 2010), and musical contests (Austin, 1990; McCormick, 2009). However, the experiences of competition unveiled by these studies were largely conservatoire-based and/or focussed on musical performance. Findings from this research, instead, reveal a broader range of perceptions of competition that embrace other musical activities and opportunities in addition to performance; indeed, the UoY Music Department represents an ideal context for this research as students with different interests across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes engage with a gamut of specialisations, activities and opportunities. Furthermore, perceptions of competition appear to be connected to other aspects including students' wellbeing, institutional support provision and career expectations. It is relevant to note that it is precisely the focus on how competitive feelings – as experienced by different categories of music students and perceived by staff and teachers in relation to students – relate to a diversity of musical activities and departmental contexts that makes this research broader in its scope and non-exclusionary; thus, this clarifies the reasons why this study has potential to make valuable contributions to music students' lived experiences in university education.

This chapter provides a general discussion of the findings gathered from students (Chapters 5, 6, 7), instrumental/vocal teachers (Chapter 8) and staff members (Chapter 9) in relation to the five research questions of this study, which embed five major themes: conceptualisation of competition, aspects prompting and softening competition within the UoY Music Department, the institutional culture of the department, relationship between students' perceptions of competition and wellbeing, and perceptions of the music industry in relation to competition. One further theme related to international students' perceptions emerged through

thematic analysis; while it is beyond the research questions, it has clear relevance for the scope of this research. Thus, this will also be discussed at the end of the chapter (section 10.7).

## **10.2 Research question 1**

### **How do stakeholders in one UK university music department conceptualise competition in relation to students within this context?**

Existing research has demonstrated that individuals' understanding of the world is dependent on their belief systems, intended as those sets of beliefs that 'define our personal sense of Reality'<sup>41</sup> (Usó-Doménech & Nescolarde-Selva, 2016, p. 148). Thus, the relevance of this research question relates to the principle that participants' individual perceptions of competition within the specific context of the UoY Music Department are dependent on how they uniquely conceptualise competition. Such conceptualisation, which connects to the interpretivist paradigm that informed this research (see 3.2.2), was expressed by participants in relation to two sub-themes: their understanding of competition, and the acknowledgement of students' varied attitudes towards competition.

#### *10.2.1 Understanding of competition*

Data from students indicated a variety of understandings of competition across different categories; most undergraduate students, for example, mainly viewed competition as an externally driven rivalry between people that, for some of them, had a hierarchical characterisation (Chapter 5). However, MA students did not focus on the diversification between an internally or externally driven sense of competition, and referred to feelings of competition in emotional terms using words as 'stressful', 'exciting' or 'painful' (Chapter 7). Furthermore, a conceptualisation of competition as dependent on the specific context was prevalent among most PhD students (Chapter 6), whereas instrumental/vocal teachers (IVTs) and staff members deemed competition as an inevitable part of students' trajectories, either in relation to students' experiences within higher education or in their future professional careers (Chapters 8 and 9).

---

<sup>41</sup> Capitalisation as in original text

While these findings do not negate the importance of individuals' self-beliefs in conceptualising competition, the different departmental contexts in which participants operate, as well as past experiences, are likely to contribute to these different understandings. Some participants at PhD level had competitive experiences in their undergraduate degrees (Chapter 6), and existing research shows that PhD students are highly motivated by a desire to learn (Teachout, 2004; Teachout, 2008) which may be in contrast with an outwardly competitive attitude. These elements, in conjunction with the individuality of the PhD research topic as well as the likelihood that a greater number of PhD students will be enrolled as part-time compared to other students, which could also result in limited opportunities to socialise and participate in activities within their institution (Gittings et al., 2018), may induce this category of participants to view competition in relation to diverse contexts. Undergraduate participants, instead, may be more exposed to direct or indirect comparison of their peers through assessments, departmental audition outcomes, ensemble participation, prizes or competitive social dynamics that take place in-class within their taught modules; the mainly externally driven understanding of competition as rivalry between people held by most of them is therefore not surprising and resonates with existing literature outlining the impact of negative evaluations by peers on musicians' high levels of anxiety (Wells et al., 2012).

#### *10.2.1.1 Inevitability of competition*

Interestingly, only a few students who took part in this research perceived competition as inevitable within their trajectory, either in relation to their studies or their future career, whereas this perception was prevalent among staff members and teachers, particularly in relation to how they envisaged students' careers. Again, different experiences and contexts in which participants operate could be a potential explanation for this; indeed, students have some agency to decide whether to compete with their peers or not within their studies. For example, those on taught programmes are free to decide whether to share their marks with their peers, and all students may opt to take part in competitive opportunities such as auditions or applications for composition performances, which may induce them to see competition as a choice rather than an inevitability. Conversely, staff members and IVTs, who have more experience of highly competitive contexts such as academia

(Carson et al., 2013) and/or the performance industry (Gross & Musgrave, 2017) are more likely to believe that students will face competitive situations at some point in their trajectories, which informs their understanding of the inevitability of competition.

### *10.2.1.2 Competition in opposition to music making*

The conceptualisation of competition as something that contrasts with music as an art form was present among some participants, particularly but not only among IVTs (Chapter 8), and is of interest for this research. In support of this view, it may be argued that the ultimate aim of music making is not to win or lose, unlike in directly competitive settings (e.g. sporting events); however, it may be questioned whether this view represents more an ideological position or a statement of hope rather than the acknowledgement of a practical reality where music is indeed competitive in several circumstances. Beyond the self-evident competitiveness of musical contests, whose pedagogical value has been questioned by Austin (1990), McCormick (2009) and Rohrer (2002), competition takes place in other forms, most of which have been mentioned in this research by students, teachers or staff members: competition within the group of peers (Chapter 5), competition for resources (Chapter 9), for seats in orchestras/ensembles, for job opportunities within a music industry that is often precarious and increasingly competitive (Canham, 2021), for research funding<sup>42</sup>.

On the other hand, evidence from literature as well as findings from this research suggest that some musical specialisations or repertoire tend to be perceived as more competitive than others, as claimed by both teachers and academic staff members (Chapters 8, 9). This idea is echoed by existing literature in relation to the collaborative, inclusive focus of community music (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018) which seems to indicate that a highly competitive orientation does not fit in with the ethos of this area, as well as to the prioritisation of western-based, standardised musical practices over others (Dolan et al., 2018; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2015) which may be perceived by musicians as more prestigious than other types of repertoire. Therefore,

---

<sup>42</sup> Competitive feelings related to orchestral seats and job opportunities emerged from all categories of participants and are, therefore, discussed in Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. Competition for research funding, instead, emerged from the questionnaire distributed to PhD students and is therefore discussed in Chapter 6.



different perceptions of musical practices may induce students to act competitively within those activities that are regarded as more prestigious and, in this sense, a dichotomy between winners (those who are successful within these coveted opportunities/musical practices) and losers (those who are not, or who are interested in other types of practices) may be endorsed; in this regard, the idea that competition in music has different effects on winners and losers as echoed by some staff members (Chapter 9) may be particularly appropriate. Furthermore, the UoY Music Department allows students some agency to decide to engage with collaborative, non-competitive practices (for example, through the undergraduate project system), but other aspects which may endorse a winner/loser dichotomy such as the awarding of prizes, funding allocation or auditions are beyond students' control. Thus, it may be questioned whether and how such dichotomy is perpetuated within higher education contexts through cultural and pedagogical attitudes towards musical practices, curricular aspects as well as choices from stakeholders.

### *10.2.2 Students' attitudes towards competition*

Through open questions, all categories of participants disclosed their ideas regarding students' attitudes towards competition within the UoY Music Department. In some cases, teachers and staff members' views mirrored students' answers. For example, students' responses to the first Likert scale presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 seem to indicate that PhD students displayed a generally lower competitive attitude and lower enjoyment of competitive situations in comparison to undergraduate and, to a lesser extent, MA students. This aligned with several IVTs and staff members' opinion that research students are generally a less competitive category in comparison to students enrolled on taught programmes. The individual characteristics of the PhD degree (Chapter 6) may partially explain such difference. As mentioned above (see 10.2.1), previous exposure to competitive situations may have played a role in determining PhD students' lower competitive attitude, and the role of past experiences in influencing students' competitive attitude was equally recognised by IVTs and staff members. This view seemed to be supported by at least one MA student (P3\_MA; Chapter 7) who studied both their undergraduate and MA degrees at the UoY Music Department; they claimed to have relaxed their competitive attitude during their MA, which also had beneficial effects on their self-perception and wellbeing. This seems to

indicate that experiences of competition have the potential to impact on students' attitudes and ability to cope with it, and, therefore, exposure to competition may produce long-term effects. In this regard, it may be relevant to distinguish between a comparative attitude that has beneficial effects and a harming competitive one, which will be discussed below.

#### *10.2.2.1 Factors influencing students' attitudes towards competition*

A self-focussed attitude coexisted with a desire to strive for excellence, reaching high standards and outperforming others among some undergraduate students (Chapter 5). Teachers and staff members, as role models, might play an important role in relation to how these views are instilled and perpetuated, as suggested by Shein and Chiou (2011) with regard to learning styles; indeed, several IVTs recognised their role in influencing, deliberately or inadvertently, students' perceptions of competition (Chapter 8). Further insights, however, derive from a distinction between comparison and competition; Johnson (2012) claimed that comparing oneself with attainable others acts as a 'motivator for human behaviour' (p. 515) and closeness and similarity of activities may induce students to compare with each other, as suggested by Garcia et al. (2013). However, for comparison to become a threatening form of competition that produces negative effects on individuals' self-views, the comparative attitude must be directed towards unattainable targets, as shown by a substantial amount of literature on upward comparisons (Collins, 1996; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Mendes et al., 2001; Muller & Fayant, 2010; Johnson; 2012). However, this did not seem to be the case for several undergraduate participants in this research, as their comparative behaviour in the UoY Music Department was targeted towards peers who they may perceive as similar in terms of level, skills and abilities. In fact, these students seemed inclined to compare themselves with their peers (in this sense, they might perceive themselves as competitive individuals, as Table 5.2 in Chapter 5 suggested) but not to engage in self-destructive competitive behaviours. Comparative behaviours seemed less prevalent among MA students, whose limited one-year presence in the department (two years for part-time students) may limit their deep engagement with social dynamics that foster comparison.

Answers from students, IVTs and staff members demonstrated that a number of concurrent factors influence students' attitudes towards competition within the UoY

Music Department: past experiences, length of exposure to potentially competitive settings, attitude to comparison with others who may be perceived as models, and individual attitude towards peers. It may also be the case that the group size fosters different attitudes to competition: as suggested by Hendricks et al. (2016), small groups may favour the creation of a close-knit community which may enhance collaboration among members and reduce competition; answers from participants did not endorse a conclusive response about the influence of group size on students' perceptions of competition, and further research may be valuable in this regard. Gathering an understanding of how students' attitudes towards competition are constructed was of preliminary interest for this research; indeed, different attitudes are likely to influence students' behaviours and, therefore, this may have practical implications on how competitive circumstances emerge within the department.

## **10.3 Research question 2**

### **Which aspects contribute to prompt or soften students' perceptions of competition in the context of one UK university music department?**

All categories of participants provided detailed comments in relation to the aspects that contributed to prompt or soften students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department. As recognised by staff members (Chapter 9), participants' specific role, activities and position within the department represented the viewpoint through which they formed their ideas about competition and students. In light of this, it is not surprising that while some themes were recurrent among all categories (e.g. aspects connected to performance, marks and assessments, role of peers), others were more clearly connected to participants' roles and activities. Therefore, having a data set that is representative of multiple categories informed a more extensive understanding of how students experience competition within the department. Subsections from 10.3.1 to 10.3.2.1 examine aspects prompting competition while section 10.3 explores those softening it. Due to the ambiguity pertaining to peer relationships<sup>43</sup>, these are discussed at the end of the section.

---

<sup>43</sup> Participants held a dual view of their peers as both their competitors and a source of support that effectively helps them reduce feelings of competition

### *10.3.1 Competition connected to musical performance*

As mentioned above, many participants from all categories agreed that musical performance activities within the department triggered a particularly acute sense of competition among students. In light of their direct involvement with performance activities, this perspective is not surprising among the undergraduate cohort, some MA students and IVTs (Chapters 5, 7, 8). Conversely, it is notable that several PhD students and staff members held the same view (Chapters 6, 9), which seemed to have been informed by direct performance experiences as well as from staff members' contact and communication with students about competition-related feelings (Chapter 9). In alignment with the conceptualisation of competition discussed in 10.2.1.2 (see above), participants' comments suggested a differentiation between various performance activities, deeming some of them more competitive and prestigious than others. For example, BA Music students, some IVTs and staff members believed that students tended to regard some ensembles as particularly prestigious; thus, the competition to get into those ensembles was particularly intense. Such perception is echoed by marketing-based literature suggesting that prestige and reputation attract individuals, for example, in relation to university rankings, as students tend to use rankings as a mark of prestige and compete to access top ranked universities (Dearden et al., 2019; Sung & Yang, 2008). However, in this case, it may be questioned whether prestige is misleading: students might choose to take part in prestigious ensembles or performance opportunities (e.g. the 45-minute final recital; the concerto audition; the audition for the Symphony Orchestra) as they feel they might gain popularity or social desirability even when these do not actually suit their interests or skills. In fact, this speculative suggestion was proposed by a few IVTs (Chapter 8) claiming that some students want to work on unsuitable repertoire because it is considered a 'high watermark of performing ability' (P13\_IVTs).

Furthermore, it may be speculated that choices based on prestige may result in increased levels of MPA, particularly for students with limited performance experience (Paliaukiene et al., 2018), which may apply particularly but not only to undergraduate students. In this regard, Dews and Williams (1989) advocated for more research on the role of music education institutions in determining and reducing stressors among students, which still remains a sporadically researched area, as highlighted by Barros et al. (2022) who found that only three studies have investigated the role of institutional

culture as a potential determinant of MPA (Barros et al., 2022). Nonetheless, an increased diversity of musical practices, as proposed by two staff members (Chapter 9) may be effective in countering the effects of prestige on students; due to the relevance that diversity may have in relation to institutional culture, this will be further discussed in 10.4.4.

#### *10.3.1.1 Auditions*

Auditions within the UoY Music Department were regarded by several participants as a particularly competitive aspect. Unsurprisingly, some BA students (Chapter 5) and a few IVTs and staff members (Chapters 8 and 9) observed that the limited availability of seats in ensembles for some instruments is likely to make competition among students specialised in those instruments particularly acute; in this regard, P1\_IVTs' suggestion to broaden the range of available ensembles and opportunities to include instruments that are less utilised in conventional ensembles (Chapter 8) is particularly appropriate.

In relation to auditions, it is worth noting that the UoY Music Department does not operate a blind-audition policy, which research demonstrates is effective in enhancing impartiality in relation to gender biases (Goldin & Rouse, 2000) and ethnicity bias (Fang & O'Flaherty, 2020). While the implementation of a blind-policy audition is likely to limit potential perceptions of unfairness or favouritism, it is debatable whether it impacts on students' perceptions of competition; overall, the high level of competition related to auditions was unquestioned by students, as shown for example by those MA students on non-performance pathways who reportedly deemed auditions as a particularly competitive domain (Chapter 7). It could then be speculated that a blind-audition policy might positively impact on fairness and transparency while not reducing the competitiveness around auditions; however, it could still be beneficial as it would likely contribute to enhance the perception of a fair and transparent competitive audition process.

#### *10.3.1.2 Competition for resources in the department*

A few MA students (Chapter 7) and one member of staff (Chapter 9) observed that some categories of students – pianists and sound-recording students – compete for resources in the department. Some MA students witnessed competition among piano-playing peers for the best practice rooms and it might be the case that such feelings

apply to other students who play non-portable instruments; while the low number of some instruments available in the department (e.g. organ, harpsichords, grand pianos) is likely to foster competition for these resources and perhaps issues of inequalities (Chapter 7), practicalities related to space and cost may act as a barrier to the provision of further instruments and practice rooms.

Similarly, competition for resources in relation to students specialising in sound recording is not surprising due to the limited number of recording studios and connected facilities. Again, the high cost of recording studios, recording equipment and space constraints are likely to act as barriers. Furthermore, despite a steady growth in recent years, the number of students enrolled in BA MASR and MA Music Production is still lower than that of the other students. Nonetheless, Clauhs et al. (2019) identified sound recording as a particularly interesting opportunity for those students whose musical interests may lie outside performing, teaching or researching; in light of the growing number of students enrolled in sound recording and music production programmes within the UoY Music Department, future investment in sound recording resources may prove beneficial for current and prospective students as more facilities and resources available may reduce competition among these students.

### *10.3.2 Competition connected to marks and assessments*

Similarly to performance activities, a substantial number of participants deemed marks and assessments as a competitive domain. One of the most interesting aspects that emerged from findings relates to students' perception of mark sharing as a stressful activity; nonetheless, only a limited number of them decided to stop sharing their marks with their peers (Chapters 5, 7). In this regard, social dynamics among students that may take place inside or outside the department could play a role; indeed, peer relationships exert a fundamental role in determining higher education students' sense of belonging to the institution (Maunder, 2018) and, therefore, students who are directly asked by their peers to share their marks might do so to live up to peer expectations and maintain their position within their social group, which directly affects their sense of belonging (Parkes, 2014). This, however, determines a situation where students may feel somehow forced into a competitive situation, regardless of their desire to enter it or not.

To some extent, the position of these students might be in opposition with that of those international MA students who deemed written assignments as a particularly competitive type of assignment (Chapter 7); indeed, comments made throughout the data set in relation to language-related barriers as well as literature evidencing writing as a prominent challenge for international students (Zhang & Mi, 2010) seems to indicate that these students perceived language-related barriers as hindering their ability to live up to their own expectations (P2\_MA, for example) or to aspire to high marks (as suggested by P13\_MA). This feeling was also reported by some international PhD students who felt competitive towards their British peers (Chapter 6). In this sense, these students seemed to feel frustrated by their perceived inability to compete – with themselves or with their peers – for high marks, as opposed to those who felt compelled to do so by their peers. Therefore, perceptions of competition related to mark sharing cannot be reduced to competitive behaviours among students based on who obtains the highest marks; while some students who felt compelled to share their marks by their peers might be unwilling to compete, others may feel more at ease in engaging with this, particularly if they have been exposed to highly competitive settings in their past learning experiences (Lam et al., 2004).

### *10.3.2.1 Visibility in assessments*

Some further distinctions in relation to the competitiveness implied in specific types of assessments were made by participants. As discussed above, written assignments might be particularly challenging for international students due to their non-English native status. Some undergraduate and MA students, however, regarded presentations and performance assessments as particularly competitive due to the visibility they entail (Chapters 5, 7), which aligns with a widespread perception among several IVTs of performance activities in the department as sharply competitive precisely for the same reason (Chapter 8). It should be noted, though, that while some modules entail students' presentations in front of their peers, end-of-year undergraduate performance assessments in years 1 and 2 are not public and the only performance-based public assessments are MA students' recitals and BA students' recitals in their final year. Therefore, only a limited number of performance assessments can be properly regarded as visible.

It is not surprising that presentations prompt competitive behaviours for students: indeed, the stressful situation represented by the assessment is associated with the visibility of students' performance, which exposes students to peer judgement. If, on the one hand, the departmental policy of individual mark sharing applies to these assessments too, on the other students' presentation skills are visible to their peers who are then able to form judgements about each other's works, which creates the conditions for a competitive context, as suggested by P3\_MA (Chapter 7). Such context might create discomfort among some students; while the value of public presentations is unquestionable for the development of oral communication skills that will be essentials for situations like job interviews (Huxham et al., 2012), and also for students who want to undertake a PhD (and thus will have to undertake a *viva voce* examination), it may be questioned whether the scarcity of oral assessments in undergraduate students' programmes as evidenced by Huxham et al. (2012) and Hounsell et al. (2007) leads some students to feel under-equipped to deal with the both the immediacy and the public aspect of oral presentations. Thus, further inquiries into students' exposure to oral assessments in their previous school education may reveal whether the perceptions of competition associated with the visibility of some assessments are indeed determined – or at least partially determined – by students' limited prior experience of this type of assessment and the competitive mindset that might be induced from this context.

### *10.3.3 Aspects softening competition*

Participants across all categories agreed that a number of aspects contributed to soften perceptions of competition among students within the UoY Music Department. Several MA and PhD students (Chapters 6, 7), staff members and teachers (Chapters 8, 9) regarded the overall departmental atmosphere as not very competitive but provided different reasons for it; the role of the staff seemed particularly important in this.

The perception of the staff as friendly and not inclined to promote a competitive culture was shared by MA, PhD and also BA students; in particular, the perception of a number of PhD students of their supervisor as a person they could talk to about their feelings of competition is particularly noteworthy in light of the importance of the research student-supervisor relationship for students' degree



completion (Castelló et al., 2017; Cohen & Baruch, 2022) and satisfaction with the degree programme (Mainhard et al., 2009). Similarly, several ITVs' positive opinion of the staff's approachability and availability (Chapter 8) suggested a generally positive perception of the UoY Music Department. Some ITVs also believed that policies such as seat rotation within the departmental orchestras, the presence of student-led ensembles and a variety of opportunities to engage with diverse musical practices through the undergraduate project system contributed to make the department non-competitive. This last aspect was also positively regarded by staff members (Chapter 9).

Students' use of several coping strategies (Chapters 5, 6, 7) also contributed to soften perceptions of competition. For some students, coping strategies may have been informed by past exposure to competitive situations/contexts as well as a progressive awareness of how competition affects them; indeed, several undergraduate students in their third year and PhD students reported becoming more able to distance themselves from competitive situations and behaviours (Chapters 5, 6). This was partly substantiated by teachers and staff members who generally deemed postgraduate students a more mature category in relation to their ability to deal with competition (Chapters 8, 9). It may be speculated that such maturity applies also to Year 3 BA students compared to Year 1 students, in relation to the broader accumulated range of experience. Nonetheless, participants' answers did not clarify whether coping strategies were learned through direct experience or discussed and promoted within the department.

A number of MA and BA students believed that institutional policies such as anonymity and individual mark sharing effectively reduced competition among students (Chapters 5, 7). Evidence from literature suggests that anonymity enhances students' confidence in the fairness of the marking process (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000), which might indicate that, in this regard, the above-mentioned MA students conceptualised competition as resulting from the fairness/unfairness of the marking process. Yet, it could be questioned whether anonymity really equates to decreased levels of competition; indeed, it does not prevent students from sharing marks and entering into a competitive mindset regarding marks. Therefore, as suggested by one undergraduate student (P2\_BA), it may be speculated that anonymity 'helps keep the competition balanced and fair', but its effects on students' competitive behaviours

may be limited. Some undergraduate students, instead, were more critical of anonymity, deeming that its purpose was not fulfilled due to previous communications with module leaders regarding draft work for assignments (Chapter 5). In light of a non-music specific body of studies questioning the educational value of anonymous marking due to its impersonal characteristics and lack of connection with students' previous works (Pitt & Norton, 2017; Pitt & Winstone, 2018; Whitelegg, 2002), more specific inquiries into music students' perceptions of anonymised marking may prove useful to support the development of robust, research-based assessment practices that conjugate the learning purpose of assessments with the promotion of equity and transparency.

#### *10.3.4 Peer relationships*

Participants held dual views regarding the role of peers in relation to students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department; peers were simultaneously perceived by several BA and MA students as their natural competitors in the department as well as a source of support that helped them deal with feelings of competition (Chapters 5, 7). This duality was also acknowledged by IVTs and staff (Chapters 8, 9). The social complexity of peer relationships in relation to academic achievement and friendship has been subject to substantial research investigation (Berthelon et al., 2019; Brouwer & Engels, 2022; Jain & Kapoor, 2015) and, in this sense, findings from this research are not surprising. Most interestingly, though, the specific coexistence of competitive behaviours with cooperative and friendly relationships in higher education can be described as context-dependent (Brooks, 2007); while a socially-oriented and collaborative environment – as a university music department is – favours the of creation of social relationships among students, the demands of the educational systems require students to undertake a more individualistic approach to academic studies, which may lead to competitive behaviours or situations.

The above observation is particularly tailored to students enrolled in taught programmes, where the immediate comparison with peers is more evident through group dynamics; several staff members, indeed, did not envisage high levels of competition among research students (Chapter 9). Likewise, PhD students (Chapter 6) identified in the similarity of research topics a potential for competition with peers

rather than in the peer relationship itself, which may reflect the lower level of social interactions among this group (Janta et al., 2014).

Lastly, one comment made by P3\_MA (Chapter 7) suggested that a supportive attitude within the community of Chinese students – which is numerically the prevalent community of international students within the UoY Music Department – inhibited competitive behaviours among these students. In light of Chinese students' increasing interest in UK higher music education (Haddon, 2019a), this view opens up further considerations; while the high number of Chinese students may favour the creation of close-knit, supportive communities, evidence from recent literature suggests that these students encounter several barriers to integration in UK universities (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017); therefore, it could be the case that reliance on their own community may be a natural response rather than an active choice to seek support from compatriots. Further considerations regarding this category of students will be provided in 10.7.2.

## **10.4 Research question 3**

### **What are stakeholders' perceptions of the institutional culture regarding competition within one UK university music department?**

Participants' answers delineated their views towards the institutional culture of the UoY Music Department as related to competition. In particular, they focussed on how institutional ethos, curricular aspects, staff and students' attitudes within the department contributed to create an institutional culture that most students, staff members and teachers deemed as not particularly geared towards competition. On the other hand, some participants recognised that the above-mentioned aspects in some respects may also, advertently or inadvertently, convey competitive values that students might absorb. Thus, the discussion below is presented in relation to the following themes: institutional ethos, curricular aspects, the role of staff, and the role of students.

#### *10.4.1 The institutional ethos*

Discussions regarding the ethos of the UoY Music Department were in many regards related to its connection with performance activities. Teachers and several staff

members deemed performance-based institutions as particularly competitive and, therefore, it is not surprising that their view of the department as not overly competitive aligns with the perception of its ethos as not heavily performance-oriented (Chapters 8, 9). It could be speculated that the competitiveness of performance-oriented institutions links directly with the characteristics of part of the music industry; due to the high competitiveness and low sustainability of performance-based careers (Bennett, 2007) and musical institutions' responsibility to prepare students for that industry, a competitive ethos may be prevalent in performance-oriented institutions. Differently, a relevant insight into the UoY Music Department's ethos was given by P6\_AcSM, who claimed that 'York attempted to train all-rounders rather than specialists'; in this sense, the department aims at providing students with a breadth of skills that, beyond making the institution less competitive, fit the reality of the global music industry where musicians are required to engage in a number of professional roles to achieve a sustainable career (Bennett, 2007). Curricular aspects such as the flexibility of the undergraduate project system and the variety of available opportunities, which will now be discussed, can be read as a manifestation of this cultural ethos.

#### *10.4.2 Curricular aspects*

Teachers and staff members held a positive view of the undergraduate project system in consideration of the variety and diversity it provided (discussed in Chapters 8, 9), which a few participants believed also effectively limited competitive feelings and behaviours among students. As mentioned above, such flexible system promotes a far-reaching musical culture that does not align with that of specialist institutions. In light of this, the suggestion to increase performance opportunities advanced by a few IVTs (Chapter 8) is understandable due to their professional expertise, but may not fit the institutional characteristics of the UoY Music Department; while relevant for students with a strong interest in performance, this suggestion may not be suitable for those students who want to develop skills and experience in other areas.

Students did not make any specific comment on the project system, but a few undergraduate participants mentioned that the provision of multiple opportunities accounted for a friendly, relaxed institutional context where collaboration and individual realisation prevailed over competition (Chapter 5). In alignment with

literature pinpointing a high interaction between students working in small group (Yazedjian & Kolkhorst, 2007), one PhD participant (P1\_PhD), observed that the prevalence of small-size group opportunities in the department allowed group members to become familiar with each other, and competitive feelings, if not absent, were not unhealthy (Chapter 6).

While no category of participants believed that the UoY Music Department was alien to competitive dynamics, as opportunities (and, in particular, performance opportunities such as auditions) were recognised as having the potential to foster competitive feelings among students, it could be speculated that participants' responses regarding the project system and the manner in which some opportunities were delivered were representative of an institutional culture that does not actively endorse competition as a core value. However, Tierney and Lanford (2018) contended that relegating institutional culture to explicit institutional procedures is over-simplistic and does not take into account the contribution of stakeholders' beliefs, values, attitudes and interaction with each other; therefore, further considerations on the role of staff, teachers and students' attitudes as well as the hidden curriculum in endorsing competitive feelings/behaviours will be addressed.

#### *10.4.3 The attitudes of staff, teachers and students*

Several staff members and IVTs reported being aware of their role in influencing students' perceptions of competition within the department (Chapters 8, 9); as part of the institution, staff members have regular contact with students and actively contribute to the creation and implementation of organisational and pedagogical policies. IVTs were regarded as a point of reference for several students, particularly among BA Music undergraduates (Chapter 5). The role of staff and teachers was also acknowledged by students; several MA students, for example, believed that staff promoted a non-competitive culture through presenting opportunities in a learning-oriented manner rather than a competitive one (Chapter 7). A similar view was shared also by some IVTs (Chapter 8); particularly relevant was P12\_IVT's comment on the concerto audition as an opportunity for students to receive feedback from a staff member rather than a competition with peers.

Staff and teachers' active commitment to endorse a non-competitive culture within the UoY Music Department is essential but not sufficient to determine the

competitiveness of an institutional culture. Students, indeed, play an important role, as shown by comments made by some of them about the extent to which their peers' attitudes to competition influence the competitiveness of the environment and, therefore, its culture (Chapter 5). Mark sharing and peer pressure (section 10.3.2), for example, illustrate clearly how peer relationships may explicitly affect students' perceptions of competition within the department. However, beyond explicitly competitive behaviours, unintended actions and unstated competitive values may be conveyed and actively influence the institutional culture of the department; these are presented in the following sections.

#### *10.4.3.1 The hidden curriculum*

Data suggested that some participants believed that specific musical specialisations were favoured by staff members over others, which may have implications for students' perceptions of competition. For example, while a few PhD students thought that some staff members' behaviours indicated a clear preference for musicology-based research (Chapter 6), a similar view was held by P14\_AdSM in relation to western classical music as compared to musical theatre (Chapter 9) while another staff member (P2\_AcSM) believed that the department was noticeably inclined to value performance more than other musical areas including sound recording, though they did not clarify whether they thought the staff had some responsibility for it.

This perception may relate to the notion of hidden curriculum as presented by Browning (2017): 'the often unspoken and sometimes unintended outcomes of participating in the educational system, often consequences of noncurricular decisions such as schedules, discipline plans, and the priority of extracurricular activities' (p. 101). These unintended outcomes were related by Pitts (2003) to those 'complex connections between attitudes, behaviour and interaction, all of which contribute to the experience of belonging to a group of learners' (p. 282). By virtue of being hidden, these unstated connections are not part of the formal curriculum but are closely related to students' learning trajectories, for 'academic, social and personal development are closely intertwined' (Pitts, 2003, p. 291). The perception of the different values placed on different specialisations may indicate that students who do not have an interest in the most prestigious specialisations might not feel equally appreciated or valued by the staff. Simultaneously, the beliefs of teachers and staff on

the high competitiveness of some ensembles/opportunities (Chapters 8, 9) might suggest that students' perceptions of competition linked to those ensembles/opportunities are connected to the presentation of these as competitive by staff and/or teachers. In this sense competitive values, while not explicit, may have been unintentionally conveyed within the institution; as the values conveyed by teachers and staff within institutions are likely to be informed by their own experiences and professional position (Nerland, 2007), this area deserves particular attention. In fact, the extent to which perceptions of competition within tertiary-level musical institutions are informed by these values may not be easily noticed due to their hidden nature. Thus, a critical reflection on the manner through which people in power influence students' attitudes and approaches to competition may enhance awareness on what (and how) values are conveyed.

#### *10.4.4 Challenges to the implementation of diversity*

Two staff members believed that increased diversity of musical practices may counter-effect competitive behaviours in the department derived from the perception of some activities/specialisations as more relevant than others. While this is increasingly an urgent matter that reflects the progressive globalisation of the music industry, Letts (2006) argues that musical diversity cannot exist without freedom of musical expression; this term imposes further reflection on its application within the context of the UoY Music Department. While students appear to have some freedom to direct their skill development over various areas of musical interests, the above mentioned perceptions suggest that not all areas are equally valued, which may foster the perception of a hierarchy of specialisations among students in favour of western classical music. This seems to indicate that 'hidden curricula about musical supremacy' (Johansen, 2021, p. 304) is present in favour of western classical music. In this sense, the conceptualisation of competition as a driver for excellence (Chapter 9) could also be a barrier to the implementation of diversity; while the development of excellence would unquestionably be a beneficial outcome of competitive feelings, the standardisation of musical excellence within the music education curriculum as rooted within the western classical tradition (Bucura, 2020) hinders the development of students' musicianship within a diversity of musical practices.

Furthermore, it may not be excluded that music students perceive different musical practices in a hierarchical manner. For example, P12\_AdSM (Chapter 9) hinted at the therapeutic effects that music may exert on music students in comparison with other subjects (e.g. physics); nonetheless, it could be argued that these effects are subject to social acceptance within the group of peers, teachers and staff. For example, students who may want to explore repertoire that does not align with the western classical tradition due to its therapeutic effects (e.g. popular piano music) may not feel equally valued within their community of peers or, as suggested by Fautley and Daubney (2018), might be unintentionally penalised in performance assessments. This means that the implementation of diversity as a tool to soften competition (as suggested by P10\_AcSM) requires institutions to recognise this potential challenge because, as reported by Kallio et al. (2012), equality of musical practices is a non-negotiable condition to implement a more diverse and inclusive institutional culture.

## **10.5 Research question 4**

**What are the perceptions of stakeholders within one UK music department with regard to the relationship between students' mental health or wellbeing and competition?**

A potential relationship between students' perceptions of competition and their mental wellbeing was acknowledged by all categories of participants. While several questions within the interviews and questionnaires were purposefully phrased to capture relationships between competition and mental health, participants' answers did not point towards the 'dynamic state of internal equilibrium' to cope with life events that characterised mental health in the definition provided by Galderisi et al. (2015, p. 231); instead, they focussed on feelings, emotions, and personal satisfaction which belong to the wellbeing domain. This may either indicate that participants conceptualised mental health simply as a set of emotional states, or that they did not envisage specific connections between students' ability to cope with life events and competition. This second suggestion seems to be supported by some teachers and staff's opinion that students' mental health was affected by several other factors beyond competition (Chapters 8, 9). For these reasons, the expression 'mental



wellbeing' seems more representative of participants' thoughts regarding the effects of competitive feelings on students' emotional sphere.

### *10.5.1 Students' wellbeing and competition in the department*

Several students, in particular undergraduates (Chapter 5), regarded positively the changes they experienced in relation to feelings of competition within the department; in particular, the kind of competition they experienced in the department resulted in increased feelings of self-confidence, motivation and self-awareness. Fewer undergraduates referred to emotions such as anxiety and stress while many PhD and MA students deemed the UoY Music Department as less competitive in comparison with their previous institutions or prior experiences of competition (Chapters 6, 7). Beyond aspects related to MA and PhD students' past experiences (see section 10.2.1), it may be reasonable to speculate that the relatively short length of MA programmes (one year, or two years for part-time students) and the uniqueness of research topics among PhD students may account for low levels of competition and limited impact on their wellbeing.

Furthermore, the limited impact of competition on students' wellbeing may be connected to the institutional culture of the department; comments from both staff and IVTs (Chapters 8, 9) as well as literature investigating how institutional factors influence practices and attitudes in higher education (Perkins, 2014) seem to point in this direction: the presentation of competitive opportunities in a learning-oriented way, the institutional ethos aimed at educating versatile musicians, the range of opportunities that create multiple platforms for students with different interests and aims are expressions of a culture that contributes to make competition less threatening for students and, thus, have a limited negative impact on their wellbeing. However, a further wellbeing related aspect that must be considered relates to the support students receive within the institution, which will now be addressed.

### *10.5.2 Support within the institution and coping strategies*

Data from Chapters 5, 6, 7 shows that all the three categories of students (BA, MA and PhD students) felt able to talk with someone about their feelings of competition within the UoY Music Department. Furthermore, the majority of staff and IVTs felt

responsible for providing students with pastoral support, which they achieved through being available and signposting to relevant support services. Participants' comments gave the impression that an effective communication network between stakeholders operated within the department and that its functionality was essential for the delivery of targeted support provision; indeed, the number of IVTs and staff members that reportedly knew who to ask for advice in the department if they had concerns about students' mental health was revealing in this sense (Chapters 8, 9). Nonetheless, a low number of staff members and teachers were more dubious about the efficiency of this network but, unfortunately, did not explain why; more specific investigation is likely to be helpful to address points for improvement in relation to departmental support provision.

In connection with wellbeing issues, several students reported making use of coping strategies to deal with the demands of competition. Unfortunately, these students did not provide any further explanation as to whether these strategies had been discussed or learned from teachers and/or staff. An interesting insight in this regard came from some IVTs (Chapter 8) who claimed to recommend mindfulness techniques as a coping strategy. This suggests that while coping strategies may not be directly addressed within instrumental/vocal lessons, as teachers have no formal requirement in this sense, some IVTs felt naturally inclined to give coping suggestions, potentially derived from their own experiences. Therefore, it is likely that part of the support provision within the institution is not formally regulated but, instead, stems from individuals' backgrounds, experiences, beliefs; it may also be the case that this type of support is deemed valuable by students, for it is rooted in real-world professional experience.

In light of the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among higher education students (Pollard et al., 2021) as well as the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic on university students (Zhai & Du, 2020), music educators (Miksza et al., 2021) and university staff (Creely et al., 2022), the implications of support provision for higher education institutions are particularly relevant; as suggested by some teachers and staff members, other factors beyond perceptions of competition may contribute to worsen students' mental health. In this regard, the general perception of the support provided within the UoY Music Department seemed rather positive.

Nonetheless, some barriers to the implementation of further support were identified by participants and will now be discussed.

#### *10.5.2.1 Barriers to further support provision*

Barriers to further support provision, identified particularly by teachers and staff members (Chapters 8, 9), included the increasing workload, time constraints among university educators (Erickson et al., 2021) as well as lack of specific training. Furthermore, students had varied opinions as to the type of support they would find beneficial (Chapters 5, 6, 7). While these practical limitations apply generally to various forms of support provision, some considerations that consider support provision in relation to musical performance, as a specific area that prompts high levels of competition, must be addressed.

The cultivation of competitive feelings was believed to be particularly high in relation to musical performance in the department. As the competitiveness of performance is connected to the visibility of live performances (e.g. even the outcome of auditions is visible through concerts), finding a compromise between reducing competitive feelings connected to performance and the nature of live performances is a difficult challenge to negotiate for the department. The implementation of recorded performances alongside live ones could represent a welcome alternative for those students who have an interest in vocal/instrumental music making but struggle to deal with live exposure. It could be argued, though, that the generally positive views regarding perceptions of competition and support provision within the UoY Music Department reduce the need for addressing this challenge in this specific context. Nonetheless, the gap in research specifically focussed on performance activities in higher music education institutions addressed by Jørgensen (2010) has not yet been bridged; however, the abundance of literature evidencing high levels of anxiety connected to performance among music students (Kokotsaki & Davidson, 2003; Paliaukiene et al., 2018; Yağışhan, 2009) make further research in this direction worthy of attention.

## 10.6 Research question 5

### **How do university music students' understandings of competition within their department relate to their perceptions of the music industry?**

Within the questionnaire and interviews, the term *music industry* was broadly intended by the researcher to indicate the whole set of music-related career opportunities that students may access on completion of their higher music education degrees; for this reason, no specification of any type of music-related professional careers has been provided within the data collection methods. The perception of the music industry as competitive belonged to most participants across the categories, which seems to indicate that most students expected to compete within the music industry whilst staff members and IVTs' experiences of the industry align with such expectation. Beyond students' individual attitudes and experiences, which of course play a part in determining their feelings of competitiveness towards the music industry, it could be questioned whether such perception was partly informed by their experiences within the UoY Music Department.

#### *10.6.1 The influence of the UoY Music Department on students' perceptions of competition within the music industry*

While no considerable insight was given from undergraduate and MA students, several PhD students believed that the UoY Music Department successfully equipped them to deal with the competitiveness of the music industry (Chapter 6). This perception corroborates most IVT and staff members' opinion that the department has a responsibility to prepare students for the competitiveness of the music industry (Chapters 8, 9). Due to the close relationship between higher education and employability (Donald et al., 2018), tertiary-level institutions clearly have a responsibility to prepare students for the competitiveness entailed in careers within a globalised economy (Yeravdekar & Tiwari, 2018). However, this perspective does not seem to consider the position of those students who may feel discouraged by the prospect of entering a highly competitive and networked market, as defined by Gross and Musgrave (2020); in this research, some IVTs' reference to competition as inevitable (Chapter 8) as well as some BA students' reluctance to enter highly

competitive professional opportunities (Chapter 5) seem to indicate that not all participants would welcome such competitiveness.

Furthermore, the performance-related musical domain was regarded by some participants as more competitive than others (Chapters 5, 9). This perception is supported by literature evidencing both the prevalence of portfolio work among performers to enhance the sustainability of a highly competitive and unstable career (Mills, 2004) as well as students' perception of higher stability within other professional domains including teaching (Jones & Parkes, 2010). Additionally, Bennett (2009) found that while stability of income and regular employment have orientated some music students' career choices towards teaching, these students have 'subsequently drawn great satisfaction from their teaching activities' (p. 316). Thus, music-related careers where students do not face the same degree of competitiveness entailed in performance may better accommodate the needs of those individuals who are not inclined to enter highly competitive job opportunities. Furthermore, the degree of transferability of the skills obtained within a music degree (Minors et al., 2017) represents an opportunity for these students to enter non-music related careers that suit their needs.

As stated above, only some PhD students provided insights into the UoY Music Department's position towards students' career preparation by claiming that they felt equipped by the department to deal with the competitiveness of the music industry. However encouraging, their answers did not clarify whether the competitiveness of the music industry as well as students' aspirations in relation to the different levels of competitiveness within multiple career opportunities were actively discussed within the department through formal training or informal conversations. Similarly, no insight has been provided as to discussions regarding the application of transferable skills in less competitive professional contexts. These findings, as well as the lack of research on the role of music institutions in providing their students with career-specific support, make a case for further inquiries to clarify how the competitiveness of the music industry is addressed within higher music education institutions to inform students' understanding of competition within music-related professions and in relation to transferable skills.

## 10.7 Perceptions of competition among international students

While no research question was specifically focussed on the perceptions of competition among international students as compared to British ones, some relevant insights from all categories of participants on these students suit the scope of this research. Thus, a comprehensive discussion of the key findings in relation to this theme will be provided. The terms *international students* and *non-British students* will be used interchangeably.

The majority of the MA students who took part in this research were international; some international students were also in the PhD cohort while all but two BA students were British. Therefore, while no relevant perspective on non-British students' perceptions of competition has been provided by the undergraduate cohort, MA and PhD students offered some interesting thoughts. A few MA students reported a lower level of competition in the UoY Music Department as compared to that experienced in their home country; this view corroborates comments from some teachers (Chapter 8) who thought that most international students grew up within a competitive culture. A relevant insight in this regard was provided by P3\_MA (Chapter 7, section 7.6) in relation to Chinese culture. In drawing a comparison between Chinese and UK educational systems, their statement suggested that Chinese instrumental/vocal teachers are subjected to a competitive culture where students' achievements are the most relevant indicator of a teacher's success; thus, this achievement-oriented culture translates into these teachers' attitude to compare students. Cultural elements like this are likely to play a part in the perception of the Chinese culture as particularly competitive, as claimed by some teachers and staff (Chapters 8, 9) and align with other studies such as Haddon (in press) and Kai (2012).

The adaptation of the competitive values in which Chinese students may have been educated to the characteristics of the UoY Music Department – which could be defined as not overtly comparative – is not without challenge. As suggested by P6\_AcSM (Chapter 9), international students who grew up within a competitive culture may feel disoriented by the limited presence of it; while no specific literature has primarily investigated the impact of exposure to a competitive culture on international students' adaptations, studies on the experiences of Chinese students

abroad pinpointed educational adaptation as a prominent challenge for these students (Yamazaki, 2005). Findings from this research (Chapters 6, 7), for example, suggest that challenges concerning their adaptation relate to language-specific issues, which may have implications for their perceptions of competition.

### *10.7.1 Language-related perceptions of competition*

Several MA and PhD students reported feelings of frustration in relation to studying and/or researching in their second language. Particularly among the PhD cohort, some international students seemed to feel unable to compete with home students in terms of producing high quality written work; as such, this inhibited students' competitive drive. While not unexpected, as speculated in Chapter 9 this perception suggests that the extent to which language is relevant in achieving academic success determines perceptions of competition. Due to the prominent role of writing in research activities and programmes, it is not surprising that PhD students were particularly frustrated by this aspect; Zhou and Todman (2009) found that adaptations to aspects such as the use of sources and academic integrity were particularly challenging for international students. In this regard, the very limited reference to language-related issues made by IVTs as compared to staff members is not surprising; only one teacher acknowledged this aspect. It could be speculated, indeed, that teachers have a limited view of this challenge as their professional role revolves around performance and, thus, students may not disclose challenges and issues that are outside IVTs' perceived area of competence.

The discrepancy between performance and writing-based activities seemed to have a different impact on feelings of competition among international students. The negotiation of these differences may not be an easy task, particularly in light of the relevant place that academic writing has in UK higher education; however, as already suggested by De Vita and Case (2003), a thorough reflection on the modes of teaching and learning as well as on the development of flexible assessment frameworks that are 'culturally fair and inclusive' (p. 395) is of paramount importance to produce an educational agenda that mirrors the increasing internationalisation of UK higher education.

### *10.7.2 Access and use of institutional support*

Some final considerations on international students' use and access to support are of interest for this research. As outlined in 10.3.4, some Chinese students perceive the community of Chinese students in the department as supportive, which helps them to deal with feelings of competition. This does not clarify whether these students are aware of and/or willing to make use of other forms of institutional support; indeed, the perception of a close-knit Chinese community may indicate that these students feel somehow separated from the rest of the student body and while this may be an individual choice, it must be questioned whether the forms of support offered by the department and the broader institution adequately respond to the needs of these students. For example, findings from this research seems to indicate that staff and teachers are strongly committed to support provision and are instructed to signpost students to relevant support services. Yet, there is no evidence as to whether and how discussions about language-related issues, educational adaptation, and different assessment systems take place with these students.

As mentioned above (section 10.5.2), feelings of competition are one of the many reasons why students may seek support provision. In consideration of both the increasing importance of support provision in higher education institutions as well as the high number of international students in the UoY Music Department and, more broadly, in UK higher education institutions, further inquiries into the provision of support services and the reception of these within the international students' community are not only desirable but also necessary.

## **10.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has explicitly discussed the main findings from each category of participant in relation to the five research questions. The views of students, teachers and staff members on students' perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department have been compared, contrasted, discussed and related to existing literature; the themes discussed related to how participants conceptualised competition, their views on those departmental aspects that may influence students' feelings of competition on multiple levels (e.g. performance, assessments, peer relationship, etc.), their views on the institutional culture of the department as



connected to how competition is addressed, the relationship between competition, wellbeing and institutional support as well as expectations towards professional careers in connection with perceptions of competition within higher music education. Moreover, despite not being explicitly connected to the research questions, the perceptions of competition as experienced by international students within the UoY Music Department has been identified as a further research-relevant theme and has thus been discussed.

The next chapter will conclude this thesis by presenting the key findings, outlining the limitations of the study, discussing the implications for future research as well as practical recommendations.

# **Chapter 11: Implications, Limitations, Future directions and Conclusion**

## **11.1 Introduction**

This research has explored how feelings of competition are experienced by music students in one UK university music department. As detailed in the literature review (Chapter 2), the association between competition and music pedagogy is not new within literature. Furthermore, musical competitions have a solid tradition within western pedagogy and are often perceived as potent vehicles to begin successful careers within the music industry (Ginsburgh & van Ours, 2003). However, this research expanded knowledge of the relationship between music and competition by exploring how perceptions of competition take place within a specific institutional context; in particular, it was speculated that the complex social dynamics, teaching and learning modes, diversified musical domains, curricular and extra-curricular activities within a university music department may account for multifaceted contexts for feelings of competition to emerge. Therefore, this research aimed at answering the following questions:

- 1) How do stakeholders in a UK university music department conceptualise competition in relation to students within this context?
- 2) Which aspects contribute to prompt or soften students' perceptions of competition in the context of a UK university music department?
- 3) What are stakeholders' perceptions of the institutional culture regarding competition within one university music department?
- 4) What are music department stakeholders' perceptions of the relationship between students' mental wellbeing and competition?
- 5) How do university music students' understandings of competition within their department relate to their perceptions of the music industry?

Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to all students within the University of York (UoY) Music Department as well as interviews with instrumental and vocal teachers (IVTs), academic and administrative staff members. The implications emerging from the findings of this research were discussed in Chapter 10 in relation to six themes: conceptualisation of competition, aspects prompting and softening competition within the UoY Music Department, competition and institutional culture, relationship between competition and mental wellbeing, competition in relation to the music industry and international students' perceptions of competition. These implications will now be collated and presented in conjunction with practical recommendations; to do so, the key findings of this research will firstly be reviewed. Furthermore, the limitations of this research are addressed; in this regard, methodological aspects and the researcher's positionality within the UoY Music Department are worthy of attention. Lastly, future directions for research are identified and a final section concludes this thesis.

## 11.2 Key Findings

To provide a context for the implications and recommendations that will be discussed (section 11.3), the key findings of this research are now briefly summarised.

- a) Students' understandings of competition was not univocal. While most undergraduate students tended to conceptualise competition as a rivalry between people which may have, for some of them, a hierarchical output, PhD students were more inclined to conceptualise competition as diversified on the basis of the specific context in which it is perceived. Some MA students, instead, preferred to focus on the emotional impact of competition by describing it through adjectives such as *exciting*, *unwelcome*, *stressful*.
- b) Students' responses to the Likert scale statements presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 indicate that this sample of PhD students displayed a lower competitive attitude in comparison with undergraduate and MA students. These findings corroborate IVTs' and staff members' prevalent opinion of research students as

a not particularly competitive category in comparison with students enrolled in taught programmes.

- c) Staff members and IVTs tended to deem competition as an inevitable part of students' trajectories, either within their studies or in their future careers. Students, however, did not necessarily have the same perception as only some of them reported feeling compelled to compete.
- d) The majority of staff and IVTs believed that their attitudes, behaviours and inclinations towards competition had the potential to influence students' own perceptions within the UoY Music Department. In connection to this finding, they also acknowledged having a pastoral support responsibility towards students. All categories of students identified IVTs and/or academic staff members as a relevant source of support.
- e) Many participants from all categories (students, IVTs and staff members) acknowledged performance activities as a major aspect influencing perceptions of competition; auditions, repertoire and, to a lesser extent, recitals were deemed as particularly competitive components within performance-related aspects.
- f) Although PhD students were not asked to comment on assessments due to the specificities of their degree programme, participants from all the other categories also acknowledged assessments as a competitive-triggering aspect. Some undergraduate and MA students regarded presentations and performance assessments as particularly competitive due to the exposure they entailed; conversely, some MA students deemed writing assessments as more competitive due to the challenges associated with writing in their second language. This perception was echoed by a few international PhD students who seemed to regard writing as a major challenge due to not being English native speakers.

- g) Several MA and PhD students deemed the institutional culture of the department as not particularly competitive. This view was echoed by staff members and teachers, whereas undergraduate students had more varied opinions with some of them deeming the department as friendly and welcoming and others viewing it as unhealthily competitive, particularly with regard to peer relationships.
- h) Participants from all categories of students reported making use of coping strategies to deal with the effects of competition. However, findings did not clarify whether these strategies were learned/discussed within the department or in other contexts (e.g. through previous experiences, within other institutions, through discussion with other communities of peers or family).
- i) Participants from all categories suggested that feelings of competition have the potential to influence individuals' mental health. Nonetheless, by making reference to individual experiences some teachers and staff members believed that factors other than competition affected their students' mental health. Students' answers, instead, suggested a relationship between competition and wellbeing rather than mental health; their responses in relation to how they were influenced by competition varied, as some of them reported positive changes in terms of enhanced motivation and self-confidence while others were more negatively impacted by it.
- j) Undergraduate and MA students did not provide substantial insights into their perceptions of the competitiveness within the music industry. Several PhD students believed that the department equipped them well to deal with such competitiveness, while the vast majority of teachers and staff members thought that students have to expect to compete within the music industry and, thus, felt that the department has a duty to prepare students. Most students perceived the industry to be competitive; however, PhD students' perception of academia did not resonate with literature addressing the high competitiveness of obtaining academic positions.

- k) International students had varied perceptions of the department; a few of them perceived it as less competitive in comparison with their undergraduate studies while some others reported feelings of frustration at not being able to compete for high marks – either with themselves or with their peers – due to language-related challenges. Nonetheless, some teachers and staff members deemed non-British students as more competitive than home students and referred to cultural differences as a reason for this. Findings, however, were not universal as a few staff members held the opposite opinion.

## **11.3 Implications and recommendations**

### *11.3.1 Context and individual experiences*

The themes arising from this research and discussed in Chapter 10 suggest that students' diverse perceptions of competition are at least partially driven by the institutional context in which they operate and their individual experiences of competition within that context. For example, undergraduate students' conceptualisation of competition as a rivalry between individuals suits well the social nature of the undergraduate programmes where students are taught in groups in academic modules and are required to join at least one ensemble every year. Likewise, by virtue of their differentiated experiences in higher education, it is not surprising that PhD students were more prone to associate competition with the different contexts in which it may take place. Other contextual and cultural aspects connected to support provision, the implementation of the project system, perceptions of staff and teachers as well as departmental opportunities also contributed to determine not only perceptions of competition among students but also the extent to which these were perceived as healthy or unhealthy.

As Perkins (2013) addressed, 'the knowledge generated of learning cultures is situated, located as it is in one space and one time, and through the lens of one group of people and one researcher' (p. 208). Thus, the investigation of the context enables the understanding of a set of cultures and institutional practices that are shaped by a group of people within one specific framework (in this case, students, IVTS, academic and administrative staff); perceptions of competition as experienced by students are intertwined within such framework. Therefore, the acknowledgment and accurate

understanding of the specific context that informs students' experiences will be of paramount importance to explore challenges, issues and concerns which might affect music students' experiences in higher education. On a practical level, it would prove particularly useful to implement teaching sessions or workshops for incoming University-level students to explore aspects connected to competition that students may experience in their trajectory at university; these include, but are not limited to, preparation for auditions, introduction to assessment processes, wellbeing-dedicated academic projects.

### *11.3.2 Expectations towards the music industry*

As discussed in Chapter 10 (section 10.6), most students expected to compete within their professional careers. Nonetheless, some of them may have an inaccurate perception of the reality of competitiveness embedded in the job market, as data from PhD students in relation to academia (Chapter 6, section 6.6) seemed to suggest. The potential discrepancy between students' experiences of competition within higher music education and their expectations of the music industry poses questions concerning the role of institutional stakeholders, educators, and policy makers in supporting students in building those skills they will need in order to face the competitiveness of the music industry. The large majority of staff and teachers who took part in this research acknowledged having such a responsibility; however, students' limited acknowledgement of competition within professional careers seems to indicate that there is room to investigate how issues of competition in relation to the music industry are addressed between students, staff, teachers and other stakeholders in higher music education. Thus, there is scope for further practical discussion among institutional stakeholders around the negotiation of music institutions' duty to endorse a supporting culture towards students (Bartram, 2009; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) and making sure students are aware of and prepared for the competitive reality of musical careers. In particular, core modules for final-year undergraduate and for taught postgraduate music students aimed at discussing and presenting career options, with a specific focus on portfolio careers and transferability of skills in other domains, may support realistic reflections on their employability in relation to the competitiveness of the job market. Similarly, PhD students may also benefit from discussions concerning employability; considering both the relevance of

the student-supervisor relationship for this category of students and the interest that some of these students may have towards undertaking an academic career, it would prove useful to address these aspects in the context of one-to-one supervisions, particularly in the final year of doctoral studies.

### *11.3.3 Prestige, visibility and diversity of musical practices*

Prestige and visibility may induce students to act more competitively; in light of the impact that such perception of visibility and increased prestige may have for students' curricular choices, and for their competitive behaviours with their peers and overall experience of the department (Chapter 10, section 10.3.1), further insights are needed to understand how these perceptions are created and perpetuated within institutions. By gaining further understanding of the underlying mechanisms through which the idea of prestige develops, institutions will be more equipped to provide students with a diversity of possibilities through a platform of music-related activities and opportunities that best suit their interests, as well as ensuring opportunities for all.

In this regard, the suggestion advanced by some staff members to implement diversity of musical practices within the curriculum is of utmost importance but, as highlighted by Powell et al. (2020), comes with its own challenges (see Chapter 10, section 10.4.4): while recent discussions of diversity are increasingly prompting the emergence of a varied range of opportunities beyond a traditional curriculum of western-based classical music, the cultural and institutional recognition of the value within these activities is likely to remain a more ingrained issue. In this sense, more practical work remains to be done not only in terms of enhancing the diversity of musical practices, but also in relation to levelling up the hierarchical structure that sees western-based musical traditions as more prestigious (Johansen, 2021): among these, it may be useful to rethink the structure of students' recitals to encourage the participation of diverse musical genres and repertoires, and to provide more training for academic and IVT staff to support their familiarisation with non-western based musical practices as well as develop flexible assessment criteria adaptable to a variety of repertoires. These practical developments could all contribute to creating an increasingly inclusive and diverse environment able to soften competitive behaviours arising from perceptions of prestige or visibility.



### *11.3.4 Hidden attitudes to competition*

Competitive values may be unintendedly conveyed by stakeholders within higher music education institutions. Findings from this research outlined that attitudes of staff, teachers or peers may tacitly influence the perception of a given environment as competitive (see Chapter 10, section 10.4.3.2). The impression that some participants had in relation to some repertoires or musical domains as being more valued by staff members through observing their attitudes and behaviours suggested that competitive values may inadvertently have been conveyed; students, indeed, may deem as more relevant/desirable those activities they perceive are highly valued by their lecturers and, thus, act more competitively towards those. Furthermore, the idea of prestige connected to some specific activities as perpetrated within the community of students may also be read in a similar fashion. In alignment with Dutton's research (1987) on the hidden curriculum, it could even be argued that these hidden attitudes and behaviours influence the culture of an institution more holistically: for example, several participants agreed that performance-oriented institutions tended to be sharply competitive, but such perception was not necessarily connected to visible and tangible aspects; indeed, none of the participants specified the reasons why they believed this, potentially indicating that implicit attitudes, beliefs, as well as pedagogical modes play a role in producing an environment perceived as competitive. Thus, a detailed understanding of the ways in which hidden attitudes support the perpetration of competitive values within higher music education institutions represent a grey area that by virtue of being hidden is worthy of particular attention.

On a practical level, the development of dedicated staff training in music institutions could represent an important step in the direction of enhancing awareness of the impact of hidden values and attitudes on music students' perceptions of an institution. While existing unconscious bias trainings typically cover aspects connected to gender, ethnicity, or age (Atewologun et al., 2018), future training could support the understanding of how individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviours have the potential to influence, however unintendedly, the values conveyed within musical institutions; for example, such training would prove useful to develop further institutional reflections on existing enablers and barriers to the implementation of a diversity of musical practices.

### *11.3.5 International students' adaptation*

International students' adaptation to the institutional culture within UK higher music education in relation to competitive values is not yet fully clarified. Findings from this research suggested that several international students found the institutional culture of the UoY Music Department less competitive than that experienced in their home country; nonetheless, whether this perception represented a challenge in terms of adapting to a new culture or not remains to be addressed. In fact, these participants did not evaluate in positive or negative terms the lower competitiveness experienced within the UK and, as suggested by P6\_AcSM (see Chapter 9, section 9.4.1.1), it cannot be excluded that such differences entail issues of adaptation, for these students may expect to compete and, potentially, feel frustrated or disoriented by a lack of explicitly competitive frameworks. Thus, further research-based investigations on international music students' adaptation in UK higher education institutions may develop university stakeholders' understanding of the relationship between previous experiences of competition and adaptation. Practical steps aimed at reducing these students' potential adaptation issues in connection with competition would then be driven and supported by research findings.

Nonetheless, some ancillary considerations need to be addressed; international students had a tendency to refer to their community of co-nationals for support seeking (section 10.7.2), thus aligning these findings with those of Sawir et al. (2012), who illustrated that students who do not feel proficient in the English language tend to interact primarily with their co-nationals. While student support is available in most UK tertiary level institutions, a valuable step in the direction of easing international students' adaptation may be to set up dedicated services; for example, the University of York support service (Open Door) currently (2023) has appointed a Mandarin speaker to facilitate the delivery of well-being and mental health support, which may effectively support Chinese students, who often outnumber students of other non-UK nationalities in higher education institutions (Cebolla-Boado, 2018). Furthermore, while students from some countries may have a community of co-nationals readily available (e.g. Chinese students), both in music departments and within the wider university context, other students are in a different position as they may not have a rich peer community of other students from their home country that speak the same language. Therefore, these students' integration in music departments may be

facilitated through practical actions that include widening ensemble participations as well as promoting a diversity of musical practices to include a variety of genres and ensembles (e.g. Gamelan ensembles).

## **11.4 Limitations**

A number of limitations were identified within this study. In particular, two types of limitations were identified: those pertaining to my position as an insider researcher and methodological limitations. Both these categories of limitations will now be presented.

### *11.4.1 Limitations related to the researcher's positionality*

My position as an insider researcher is likely to have impacted several aspects of the research: some participants – particularly, but not only, interviewees – may have been influenced by my non-neutral position as a member of the institutional community. In particular, they may have been reticent to share their opinions in full honesty to protect themselves or the institution, as suggested by Cohen et al. (2018). Anonymity concerns may have also impacted participants' answers; indeed, as this case study took place in the institution the researcher belonged to, the chances of identification were higher than in studies conducted by external researchers. Furthermore, while a high degree of reflexivity has been taken to counter-effect researcher bias (see Chapter 3), some aspects of the data collection were inevitably oriented by my own background of values, beliefs and experiences within the UoY Music Department; this is particularly true for additional unprepared questions, probes and prompts used during the semi-structured interviews due to the responsive improvisational element embedded in this method of data collection.

### *11.4.2 Methodological limitations*

Four other limitations belong to methodological aspects of the research. First, the limited sample sizes as well as the specific institutional features of the research context did not allow for the findings to be generalisable. Second, the use of a questionnaire as a data collection tool accommodated ethical considerations in relation to students as a vulnerable category (see Chapter 4), but it was not the ideal

method to capture richness of data within participants' experiences, thoughts and opinions. Therefore, to develop a qualitative instrument able to generate rich data and fulfil the aim of the research, the questionnaires included several open questions; as Robson and McCartan pointed out (2016), this could result in participants' fatigue, inaccurate answers, and low response rate. Third, due to the lack of pre-existing measurement scales, some self-constructed items were used within the questionnaire. As a result, some of the items utilised within this research are not yet tested and validated; therefore, the construction of measurement scales to assess the development of competitive feelings in relation to curricular institutional activities is recommended. A fourth limitation pertains to the exploratory nature of the study; all categories of students are likely to have had experiences of competitive feelings in previous institutional settings (e.g. in schools, during their undergraduate or master studies) as well as other non-institutional contexts. Thus, their perceptions of competition within the UoY Music Department may have been subjected to biases derived from other external experiences. A more systematic approach to research may provide a clearer demarcation between the perceptions of competition informed by a specific setting and past experiences of competition.

## **11.5 Future research directions**

This thesis has developed an exploratory understanding of perceptions of competition among a group of music students within one UK university music department.

Therefore, a number of themes worthy of further exploration have been identified and will now be summarised:

- a) This study has investigated the perceptions of competition of a group of music students in a tertiary-level institution in the UK. The ways in which these perceptions are formed, developed and experienced by music students in tertiary-level institutions, however, is likely to be informed by their previous education; for example, there may be significant differences in how competition is experienced and addressed in private and state schools. Future research is needed to unveil how perceptions of competition connect to music

classes/ensemble experience in primary and secondary schools and how these may inform perceptions in higher education.

- b) This study suggested that past experiences with competitive situations tend to strengthen students' ability to cope with these. For example, one MA student (P3\_MA) who had studied their undergraduate degree in the same institution reported positive changes in their ability to cope with competition. While this experience was echoed by findings outlining a tendency for third-year undergraduate, MA and PhD students to deal with competitive feelings better than their younger peers, it remains unclear how these perceptions change over time as well as what determines such changes. Future longitudinal research may unveil how time, experiences and contexts influence students' perceptions of competition.
- c) While findings from this research evidenced students' mixed feelings regarding assessment anonymity, it was surprising that none of them referred to moderation as a departmental policy implemented to enhance the fairness of the marking process; as such, it may have indirect implications on students' perceptions of competition towards assessments. Further research is thus needed to address the role, visibility and effectiveness of moderation in relation to softening students' perceptions of competition in higher music education.
- d) Some participants suggested that the implementation of diverse musical practices may effectively reduce students' perceptions of competition. This thought-provoking suggestion has not yet been substantiated by research. In light of the increasing body of research discussing the practical application of diversity within musical institutions, future studies may address whether such application has effects on how students perceive competition, particularly but not only, in relation to performance and repertoire.
- e) Several participants observed that experiences of competition have the potential to influence music students' mental health. However, they also

believed that competition itself does not necessarily play a primary role in this, as mental health is influenced by several other factors including previous experiences, genetic factors, social and family backgrounds. Further empirical research may be beneficial to explore more closely whether there is a relationship between feelings of competition as experienced in the context of a higher music education institution and students' mental health.

- f) Findings from this research suggested that further empirical studies could be beneficial to unveil more specifically how issues of competition within the music industry are presented in tertiary-level music institutions and whether there are differences between categories of students in relation to how these issues are addressed.
  
- g) As pointed out in the implications (section 11.3.5), the adaptation barriers experienced by international students may also relate to competitive values; their cultural and individual background is likely to have informed an approach to competition that may not be reflected in the institutional culture of UK higher education music institutions. Furthermore, despite the prevalence of Chinese nationals in UK universities, international students represent a diverse group that brings within institutions a heterogeneity of backgrounds and musical experiences. Thus, further investigations may explore more specifically the challenges experienced by different groups of international music students (e.g. Chinese students as compared to European students) in adapting to the competitive/non-competitive values embedded within UK universities.
  
- h) This study has investigated the perceptions of competition among music students within the university setting. As noted in Chapter 2, only a limited amount of comparative research has focussed on the institutional culture of conservatoires and universities and, to my knowledge, no study has compared perceptions of competition in these two different types of institutions. Future comparative research may then unveil the specificities as well as the similarities and differences between music students' perceptions of competition in university and conservatoire settings.

## 11.6 Conclusion

As outlined in the introductory chapter (Chapter 1), the purpose of this thesis was to explore a topic – the multifaceted perceptions of competition among students in higher music education – that is often part of the experiences of music students but not always explicitly recognised. Through my own experience, I often witnessed how the competitive undertones of relationships between peers, relationships with instrumental/vocal teachers, of music making processes and assessment, as well as of discussions regarding music career prospects were often present within the culture of musical institutions; however, these were usually not addressed, potentially due to the social implications attached to this complex interaction of factors. The unique characteristics of the UoY Music Department represented an important stimulus for me to conduct this research in my own institution: the flexibility of projects, performance opportunities as well as academic output of the programmes made this department an ideal context to explore wide-ranging perceptions of competition. The subsequent engagement with literature (Chapter 2) not only helped me to refine my understanding of competition but also made me aware that existing literature tended to explore it in conjunction with other topics including perceptions of institutional culture, support provision, mental health, but very limited space was devoted to discussing it as an individual topic.

Giving music students a platform to reflect on their experiences, collect their thoughts and ultimately express their opinions regarding competition in a safe, anonymous way represented a major stimulus in undertaking this research. The interview study conducted with staff members and instrumental/vocal teachers also provided an invaluable contribution; in particular, the triangulation of the findings enabled a more accurate, complex and reliable understanding of how competitive experiences are intertwined within a socially complex environment. While this was an initial exploratory study of a relatively under-researched topic, my hope is that it will pave the way for future studies that will further expand knowledge of competition as experienced by music students and make practical contributions to address it within music institutions.

## Reference list

- Abbott, A. (2019). Career stage and publication in American academia. *Sociologia, Problemas, e Práticas, 90*, 9-30. <https://doi.org/10.7458/spp20199014297>
- Abrahams, F. (2005). The application of critical pedagogy to music teaching and learning: A literature review. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education, 23*(2), 12-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233050230020103>
- Abrahams, F. (2019). Assessment and critical pedagogy: A perspective from the United States. In T. S. Brophy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of assessment policy and practice in music education* (pp. 307-323). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190248130.013.51>
- Abramo, J. M. (2017). The phantasmagoria of competition in school ensembles. *Philosophy of Music Education Review, 25*(2), 150-170. <https://doi.org/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.25.2.04>
- Ackermann, B., Adams, R., & Marshall, E. (2002). Strength or endurance training for undergraduate music majors at a university? *Medical Problems of Performing Artists, 17*, 33-41. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2002.1006>
- Adachi, C., Tai, J. H., & Dawson, P. (2017). Academics' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of self and peer assessment in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 43*(2), 294-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2017.1339775>
- Akanwa, E. E. (2015). International students in western developed countries: History, challenges, and prospects. *Journal of International Students, 5*(3), 271-284. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i3.421>
- Akram, W., & Kumar, R. (2017). A study on positive and negative effects of social media on society. *International Journal of Computer Sciences and Engineering, 5*(10), 351-354. <https://doi.org/10.26438/ijcse/v5i10.351354>
- Aliakbari, M., & Faraji, E. (2011). Basic principles of critical pedagogy. *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research, 17*, 77-85. <http://www.ipedr.com/vol17/14-CHHSS%202011-H00057.pdf>
- Altonji, J. G., Arcidiacono, P., & Maurel, A. (2016). The analysis of field choice in college and graduate school: Determinants and wage effects. In E. A. Hanushek, S.



- Machin & L. Woessmann (Eds.), *Handbook of the economics of education* (5th ed., pp. 305-396). Elsevier. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-63459-7.00007-5>
- Andersson, E. R., Hagberg, C. E., & Hägg, S. (2021). Gender bias impacts top-merited candidates. *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, 6, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frma.2021.594424>
- Anshel, M. H., & Anderson, D. I. (2002). Coping with acute stress in sport: Linking athletes' coping style, coping strategies, affect, and motor performance. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping: An International Journal*, 15(2), 193-209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800290028486>
- Araujo L. S., Wasley, D., Perkins, R., Atkins, L., Redding, E., Ginsborg, G., & Williamon, A. (2017). Fit to perform: An investigation of higher education music students' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards health. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01558>
- Arditi, D. (2020). *Getting signed. Record contracts, musicians, and power in society*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44587-4>
- Arifin, S. R. M. (2018). Ethical considerations in qualitative study. *International Journal of Care Scholars*, 1(2), 30-33. <https://doi.org/10.31436/ijcs.v1i2.82>
- Armstrong, D., Gosling, A., Weinman, J., & Marteau, T. (1997). The place of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research: An empirical study. *Sociology*, 31(3), 597-606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038597031003015>
- Árnason, K., Briem, K., & Árnason, A. (2018). Effects of an education and prevention course for university music students on their body awareness and attitude toward health and prevention. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 33(2), 131-136. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2018.2021>
- Arthur, J., Waring, M., Coe, R., & Hedges, L. V. (2012). *Research methods and methodologies in education*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Asmus, E. P. (1994). Motivation in music teaching and learning. *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning*, 5, 5-32. <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol16/iss5/31>
- Assessment. (2023). *Cambridge dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/assessment>

- Atewologun, D., Cornish, T., & Tresh, F. (2018). *Unconscious bias training: An assessment of the evidence for effectiveness* (Research Report No. 113). Equality and Human Rights Commission.  
[https://www.ucd.ie/equality/t4media/ub\\_an\\_assessment\\_of\\_evidence\\_for\\_effectiveness.pdf](https://www.ucd.ie/equality/t4media/ub_an_assessment_of_evidence_for_effectiveness.pdf)
- Austin, J. R. (1988). *Competitive and non-competitive goal structures: An analysis of motivation and achievement outcomes among elementary band students* (Publication No 8913151) [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Iowa]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/303674473?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Austin, J. R. (1990). Competition: Is music education the loser? *Music Educators Journal*, 76(6), 21–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3400964>
- Azhar, M., Nadeem, S., Naz, F., Perveen, F., & Sameen, A. (2014). Impact of parental education and socio-economic status on academic achievements of university students. *European Journal of Psychological Research*, 1(1), 1-9.  
<http://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/IMPACT.pdf>
- Azmat, G., & Simion, S. (2017). *Higher Education funding reforms: A comprehensive analysis of educational and labor market outcomes in England*. (Discussion paper series No. 11083). Bonn: IZA Institute of Labor Economics.  
<https://docs.iza.org/dp11083.pdf>
- Barden, N., & Caleb, R. (2019). *Student mental health & wellbeing in higher education*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Barnes, B. J., Williams, E. A., & Archer, S. A. (2010). Characteristics that matter most: Doctoral students' perceptions of positive and negative advisor attributes. *NACADA Journal*, 30(1), 34-46. <https://doi.org/10.12930/0271-9517-30.1.34>
- Barrable, A., Papadatou-Pastou, M., & Tzotzoli, P. (2018). Supporting mental health, wellbeing and study skills in higher education: An online intervention system. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 12(54).  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-018-0233-z>
- Barros, S., Marinho, H., Borges, N., & Pereira, A. (2022). Characteristics of music performance anxiety among undergraduate music students: A literature review.

*Psychology of Music*, 50(6), 2021-2043.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/03057356211066967>

Bartleet, B., Ballico, C., Bennett, D., Bridgstock, R., Draper, P., Tomlison, V., & Harrison, S. (2019). Building sustainable portfolio careers in music: Insights and implications for higher education. *Music Education Research*, 21(3), 282-294.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2019.1598348>

Bartleet, B., & Higgins, L. (2018). *The Oxford handbook of community music*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190219505.001.0001>

Bartram, B. (2009). Student support in higher education: Understandings, implications and challenges. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63(3), 308-314.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00420.x>

Baruch, Y., & Hall, D. T. (2004). The academic career: A model for future careers in other sectors? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(2), 241-262.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2002.11.002>

Bates, E. A., & Kaye, L. K. (2014). "I'd be expecting caviar in lectures": The impact of the new fee regime on undergraduate students' expectations of higher education.

*Higher Education*, 67, 655-673. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9671-3>

Bath, N., Daubney, A., Mackrill, D., & Spruce, G. (2020). The declining place of music education in schools in England. *Children & Societies*, 34(5), 443-457.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12386>

Battle, J., & Lewis, M. (2002). The increasing significance of class: The relative effects of race and socioeconomic status on academic achievement. *Journal of Poverty*,

6(2), 21-35. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J134v06n02\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J134v06n02_02)

Bennett, D. (2007). Utopia for music performance graduates. Is it achievable, and how should it be defined? *British Journal of Music Education*, 24(2), 179-189.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051707007383>

Bennett, D. (2008). *Understanding the classical music profession: The past, the present and strategies for the future*. Ashgate. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315549101>

Bennett, D. (2009). Academy and the real world: Developing realistic notions of career in the performing arts. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 8(3), 309-327.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022209339953>

- Bennett, D. (2012). Rethinking success: Music in higher education. *International Journal of the Humanities*, 9(5), 181-187. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9508/cgp/v09i05/43231>
- Bennett, D., & Burnard, P. (2016). Human capital career creativities for creative industries work: Lessons underpinned by Bourdieu's tools for thinking. In R. Comunian & A. Gilmore (Eds.), *Higher education and the creative economy: Beyond the campus* (pp.123-142). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688305>
- Bennett, D., McArthur, S., Hope, C., & Goh, T. (2018). Creating a career as a woman composer: Implications for music in higher education. *British Journal of Music Education*, 35(3), 237-253. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051718000104>
- Berta, N., Julien, L. A., & Tricou, F. (2012). On perfect competition: Definitions, usages and foundations. *Cahiers d'économie Politique/Papers in Political Economy*, 63(2), 7– 24. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cep.063.0007>
- Berthelon, M., Bettinger E., Kruger, D. I., & Montecinos-Pearce, A. (2019). The structure of peers: The impact of peer networks on academic achievement. *Research in Higher Education*, 60(7), 931-959. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-09543-7>
- Bewick, B., Koutsopoulou, G., Miles, J., Slaa, E., & Barkham, M. (2010). Changes in undergraduate students' psychological well-being as they progress through university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(6), 633-645. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903216643>
- Bhattacharjee, A. (2012). *Social science research: Principles, methods and practices*. Textbook Collection 3. [http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/oa\\_textbooks/3](http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/oa_textbooks/3)
- Biddle, B. J., & Anderson, D. S. (1986). Theory, methods, knowledge and research on teaching. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 230- 252). Macmillan.
- Biggs, M. A. R., & Büchler, D. (2007). Rigour and practice-based research. *Design Issues*, 23(3), 62-69. <https://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2007.23.3.62>
- Blaikie, N. W. H. (1991). A critique of the use of triangulation in social research. *Quality and Quantity*, 25, 115-136. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00145701>

- Blanchard, C., & Haccoun, R. R. (2020). Investigating the impact of advisor support on the perceptions of graduate students. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(8), 1010-1027. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1632825>
- Bliss, L. B., & Sandiford, J. R. (2004). Linking study behaviors and student culture to academic success among Hispanic students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 28(3), 281-285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668920490256462>
- Boblin, S. L., Ireland, S., Kirkpatrick, H., & Robertson, K. (2013). Using Stake's qualitative study approach to explore implementation of evidence-based practice. *Qualitative Health Research*, 23(9), 1267-1275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313502128>
- Bolton, P. (2021). *Higher education funding in England*. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7973/>
- Boneva, T., Golin, M., & Rauh, C. (2022). Can perceived returns explain enrollment gaps in postgraduate education? *Labour Economics*, 77, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2021.101998>
- Bonner, A., & Tolhurst, G. (2002). Insider-outsider perspectives of participant observation. *Nurse Researcher*, 9(4), 7-19. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2002.07.9.4.7.c6194>
- Boone, H. N., & Boone, D. A. (2012). Analyzing Likert data. *The Journal of Extension*, 50(2), 1-5. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol50/iss2/48>
- Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self-assessment*. Kogan Page. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315041520>
- Bowman, W. (2009). The community in music. *International Journal of Community Music*, 2, 109-128. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.2.2-3.109\\_1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.2.2-3.109_1)
- Bradley, S., Johnes, G., & Millington, J. (2001). The effect of competition on the efficiency of secondary schools in England. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 135(3), 545-568. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217\(00\)00328-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0377-2217(00)00328-3)
- Brand, M. (2001). Chinese and American majors: Cross-cultural comparisons in motivation and strategies for learning and studying. *Psychology of Music*, 29, 170-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735601292006>

- Brankovic, J., Ringel, L., & Werron, T. (2018). How rankings produce competition: The case of global university rankings. *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie*, 47(4), 270-288. .  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2018-0118>
- Brans, K., Van Mechelen, I., Rimé, B., & Verduyn, P. (2014). To share, or not to share? Examining the emotional consequences of social sharing in the case of anger and sadness. *Emotions*, 14(6), 1062-1071. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037604>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Breen, L. J. (2007). The researcher 'in the middle': Negotiating the insider/outsider dichotomy. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(1), 163-174.  
<https://espace.curtin.edu.au/handle/20.500.11937/22045>
- Breitenbach, A. K., Bernstein, J., Ayars, C., & Konecny, L. (2019). The influence of family on doctoral student success. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 14, 761-782. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4450>
- Brew, A. (1999). Towards autonomous assessment: Using self-assessment and peer assessment. In S. Brown & A. Glasner (Eds.), *Assessment matters in higher education: Choosing and using diverse approaches* (pp. 159-171). Open University Press.
- Briggs, A. R. J., Clark, J., & Hall, I. (2012). Building bridges: Understanding student transition to university. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18(1), 3-21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2011.614468>
- British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of ethics and conduct*.  
<https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/code-ethics-and-conduct>
- Brooks, R. (2007). Friends, peers and higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(6), 693-707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701609912>
- Brophy, J. (2006). History of research on classroom management. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 17-46). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203874783-7>

- Brouwer, J., & Engels, M. C. (2022). The role of prosocial attitudes and academic achievement in peer networks in higher education. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 37*(2), 567-584. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-020-00526-w>
- Brown, L. (2009). An ethnographic study of the friendship patterns of international students in England: An attempt to recreate home through conational interaction. *International Journal of Educational Research, 48*(3), 184-193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2009.07.003>
- Brown, L., & Holloway, I. (2008). The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: An ethnographic study. *Journal of Research in International Education, 7*(2), 232-249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240908091306>
- Brown, S. (2015). *Learning, teaching and assessment in higher education: Global perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Browning, B. P. (2017). *An orientation to musical pedagogy: Becoming a musician-educator*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199928200.001.0001>
- Bucura, E. (2020). Rethinking excellence in music education. *Visions of Research in Music Education, 36*(6), 1-28. <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1244&context=vrme>
- Burin, A. B., & Osorio, F. L. (2017). Music performance anxiety: A critical review of etiological aspects, perceived causes, coping strategies and treatment. *Archives of Clinical Psychiatry, 44*(5), 127-133. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-60830000000136>
- Burland, K., & Davidson, J. W. (2002). Training the talented. *Music Education Research, 4*(1), 121-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800220119813>
- Buyer, P. (2005). Teaching the values of competition. *Teaching Music, 13*(1), 6–10. <http://www.paulbuyer.com/article/PBuyer-2005-ValuesofCompetition.pdf>
- Byers, V. T., Smith, R. N., Hwang, E., Angrove, K. E., Chandler, J. I., Kelsey, M. C., Dickerson, S., McAlister-Shields, L., Thompson, S. P., Denham, M. A., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2014). Survival strategies: Doctoral students' perceptions of

- challenges and coping methods. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 9, 109-136. <https://doi.org/10.28945/2034>
- Byl, E., Struyven, K., Meurs, P., Abelshausen, B., Vanwing, T., Engels, N., & Lombaerts, K. (2016). The value of peer learning for first-year postgraduate university students' social and academic integration. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 228, 299-304. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.07.044>
- Cachia, M., Lynam, S., & Stock, R. (2018). Academic success: Is it just about the grades? *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 3(1), 434-439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23752696.2018.1462096>
- Caleb, R. (2019). From strategy to policy and procedure: Making mental health policies work. In N. Barden & R. Caleb (Eds.), *Student mental health & wellbeing in higher education* (pp. 105-124). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529700435.n6>
- Cage, E., Jones, E., Ryan, G., Hughes, G., & Spanner, L. (2021). Student mental health and transitions into, through and out of university: Student and staff perspectives. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(8), 1076-1989. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2021.1875203>
- Cameron, R. (2009). A sequential mixed model research design: Design, analytical and display issues. *Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, 3(2), 140-152. <https://doi.org/10.5172/mra.3.2.140>
- Canham, N. (2021). *Preparing musicians for precarious work*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344794>
- Carey, P. (2018). The impact of institutional culture, policy and process on student engagement in university decision-making. *Perspectives: Policy and Practices in Higher Education*, 22(1), 11-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2016.1168754>
- Carless, D. (2009). Learning-oriented assessment: Principles, practice and a project. In L. H. Meyer, S. Davidson, H. Anderson, R. Fletcher, P.M. Johnston, & M. Rees (Eds.), *Tertiary assessment & higher education student outcomes: Policy, practice & research* (pp.79-90). Ako Aotearoa.
- Carnell, B. (2016). Aiming for autonomy: Formative peer assessment in a final-year undergraduate course. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(8), 1269-1283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1077196>



- Carson, L., Bartneck, C., & Voges, K. (2013). Over-competitiveness in academia: A literature review. *Disruptive Science and Technology*, 1(4), 183-190. <https://doi.org/10.1089/dst.2013.0013>
- Casanova, O., Zarza, F. J., & Orejudo, S. (2018). Differences in performance anxiety levels among advanced conservatory students in Spain, according to type of instrument and academic year of enrolment. *Music Education Research*, 20(3), 377-389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2018.1433145>
- Castelló, M., McAlpine, L., & Pyhältö, K. (2017). Spanish and UK post-PhD researchers: Writing perceptions, well-being and productivity. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(6), 1108-1122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1296412>
- Cattani, G., Porac, J. F., & Thomas, H. (2017). Categories and competition. *Strategic Management Journal*, 38(1), 64-92. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2591>
- Cebolla-Boado, H., Hu, Y., & Soysal, Y. (2018). Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(3), 365-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1349649>
- Chamberlin, K., Yasué, M., & Chiang, I. A. (2018). The impact of grades on student motivation, 0(0). *Active Learning in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787418819728>
- Chanwimalueang, T., Aufegger, L., Adjei, T., Wasley, D., Cruder, C., Mandic, D. P., & Williamon, A. (2017). Stage call: Cardiovascular reactivity to audition stress in musicians. *PLoS ONE*, 12(4), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176023>
- Chao, C., Hegarty, N., Angelidis, J., & Fu, V. L. (2017). Chinese students' motivations for studying in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 7(2), 257-269. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i2.380>
- Chemers, M. M., Hu, L., & Garcia, B. F. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first-year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(1), 55-64. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.93.1.55>
- Chenail, R. J. (2011). Interviewing the investigator: Strategies for addressing the instrumentation and researcher bias concerns in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 255-262. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2009.2821>

- Choi, J. H. (2012). Attitudes of international music students from East Asia toward US higher education institutions. *International Journal of Music Education, 31*(3), 346-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761411433719>
- Chowdhury, F. (2019). Application of rubrics in the classroom: A vital tool for improvement in assessment, feedback and learning. *International Education Studies, 12*(1), 61-68. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v12n1p61>
- Clancy, R. B., Herring, M. P., MacIntyre, T. E., & Campbell, M. J. (2016). A review of competitive sport motivation research. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 27*, 232-242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2016.09.003>
- Clauhs, M., Franco, B., & Cremata, R. (2019). Mixing it up: Sound recording and music production in school music programs. *Music Educators Journal, 106*(1), 55-63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432119856085>
- Cohen, A., & Baruch, Y. (2022). Abuse and exploitation of doctoral students: A conceptual model for traversing a long and winding road to academia. *Journal of Business Ethics, 180*(2), 505-522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04905-1>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203029053>
- Collins, R. (1996). For better or worse: The impact of upward social comparison on self-evaluations. *Psychological Bulletin, 119*(1), 51-69. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.119.1.51>
- Competition. (2023). *Cambridge dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/competition>
- Comunian, R., Faggian A., & Jewell, S. (2014). Exploring music careers: Music graduates and early career trajectories in UK. In N. Crossley, S. McAndrew, & P. Widdop (Eds.), *Social networks and music worlds* (pp. 165-188). Routledge.
- Conley, C. S., Durlak, J. A., Kirsch, A. C. (2015). A meta-analysis of universal mental health prevention programs for higher education students. *Prevention Science, 16*(4), 487-507. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-015-0543-1>
- Conway, C., Eros, J., Pellegrino, K., & West, C. (2010). Instrumental music education students' perceptions of tensions experienced during their undergraduate degree. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 58*(3), 260-275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429410377114>

- Corbin, W. R., Farmer, N. M., & Nolen-Hoekesma, S. (2013). Relations among stress, coping strategies, coping motives, alcohol consumption and related problems: A mediated moderation model. *Addictive Behaviors, 38*(4), 1912-1919.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2012.12.005>
- Cottrell, S. (2004). *Professional music-making in London: Ethnography and experience*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351151320>
- Creech, A., Gaunt, H., Hallam, S., & Robertson, L. (2009). Conservatoire students' perceptions of masterclasses. *British Journal of Music Education, 26*(3), 315-331.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s026505170999012x>
- Creech, A., Papageorgi, I., Duffy, C., Morton, F., Haddon, E., Potter, J., De Bezenac, C., Whyton, T., Himonides, E., & Welch, G. (2008). From music students to professional: The process of transition. *British Journal of Music Education, 25*(3), 315-331. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051708008127>
- Creely, E., Laletas, S., Fernandes, V., Subban, P., & Southcott, J. (2022). University teachers' well-being during a pandemic: The experiences of five academics. *Research Papers in Education, 37*(6), 1241-1262.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2021.1941214>
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Crouzevialle, M., & Butera, F. (2017). Performance goals and task performance: Integrative considerations on the distraction hypothesis. *European Psychologist, 22*(2), 73-82. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000281>
- Cruder, C., Barbero, M., Koufaki, P., Soldini, E., & Gleeson, N. (2020). Prevalence and associated factors of playing-related musculoskeletal disorders among music students in Europe. Baseline findings from the Risk of Music Students (RISMUS) longitudinal multicentre study. *PLoS ONE, 15*(12), 1-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0242660>
- Currie, J., & Vidovich, L. (2000). Privatization and competition policies for Australian universities. *International Journal of Educational Development, 20*(2), 135-151.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0738-0593\(99\)00065-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0738-0593(99)00065-6)

- Dai, D. Y. (2013). Excellence at the cost of social justice? Negotiating and balancing priorities in gifted education. *Roeper Review*, 35(2), 93-101.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2013.766961>
- Daniel, R. (2004). Peer assessment in musical performance: The development, trial and evaluation of a methodology for the Australian tertiary environment. *British Journal of Music Education*, 21(1), 89-110.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051703005515>
- Davidson, L., Chinamn, M., Kloos, B., Weingarten, R., Stayner, D., & Kraemer Tebes, J. (1999). Peer support among individuals with severe mental illness: A review of evidence. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 6(2), 165-187.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.6.2.165>
- de Valero, Y. F. (2001). Departmental factors affecting time-to-degree and completion rates of doctoral students at one land-grant research institution. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(3), 341-367. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649335>
- De Vita, G., & Case, P. (2003). Rethinking the internationalisation of in UK higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(4), 383-398.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877032000128082>
- Dearden, J. A., Grewal, R., & Lilien, G. L. (2019). Strategic manipulation of university rankings, the prestige effect, and student university choice. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 56(4), 691-707.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022243719831258>
- Demirbatir, R. E. (2012). Undergraduate music students' depression, anxiety and stress levels: A study from Turkey. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 2995-2999. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.05.603>
- Demirbatir, R. E. (2015). Relationships between psychological well-being, happiness, and educational satisfaction in a group of university music students. *Educational Research and Reviews*, 10(15), 2198, 2206.  
<https://doi.org/10.5897/err2015.2375>
- Demirbatir, R. E., Bayram, N., & Bilgel, N. (2012). Is the healing force of music far away from the undergraduate music education students? *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Science*, 2(1), 341-354.  
<https://hrmars.com/index.php/IJARBSS/article/view/8744/Is-The-Healing-Force-Of-Music-Far-Away-From-The-Undergraduate-Music-Education-Students>

- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.) (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Sage Publications Ltd. <http://www.daneshnamehicsa.ir/userfiles/files/1/9-%20The%20SAGE%20Handbook%20of%20Qualitative%20Research.pdf>
- Dericks, G., Thompson, E., Roberts, M., & Phua F. (2019). Determinants of PhD student satisfaction: The roles of supervisor, department, and peer qualities. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(7), 1053-1068. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1570484>
- Dews, C. L. B., & Williams, M. S. (1989). Students' musicians personality styles, stresses, and coping patterns. *Psychology of Music*, 17, 37-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735689171004>
- Diaz, F. M. (2010). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among collegiate instrumentalists. *Contributions to Music Education*, 37(1), 23-35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24127266>
- Dibben, N. (2006). The socio-cultural and learning experiences of music students in a British university. *British Journal of Music Education*, 23(1), 91-116. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051705006765>
- Dickinson, P., & Adam, J. (2017). Values in evaluation – The use of rubrics. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 65, 113-116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.07.005>
- Dimitrova, G., & Dimitrova, T. (2017). Competitiveness of the universities: Measurement capabilities. *Trakia Journal of Science*, 15(1), 311-316. <https://doi.org/10.15547/tjs.2017.s.01.055>
- Doan, L. (2013). Is feedback a waste of time? The students' perspective. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 1(2), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v1i2.69>
- Dolan, D., Jensen, H. J., Mediano, P. A. M., Molina-Solana, M., Rajpal, H., Rosas, F., & Sloboda, J. A. (2018). The improvisational state of mind: A multidisciplinary study of an improvisatory approach to classical music repertoire performance. *Frontiers of Psychology*, 9, 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01341>
- Dompnier, B., Darnon, C., & Butera, F. (2013). When performance-approach goals predict academic achievement and when they do not: A social value approach. *The British Journal of Social Psychology*, 52, 587-596. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12025>

- Donald, W. E., Ashleigh, M. J., & Baruch, Y. (2018). Students' perceptions of education and employability. *Career Development International*, 23(5), 513-540.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/cdi-09-2017-0171>
- Doody, O., & Noonan, M. (2013). Preparing and conducting interviews to collect data. *Nurse Researcher*, 20(5), 28-32.  
<https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2013.05.20.5.28.e327>
- Dutton, T. A. (1987). Design and studio pedagogy. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 41(1), 16-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1424904>
- Eisenberg, D., Golberstein, E., & Gollust, S.E. (2007). Help-seeking and access to mental health care in a university student population. *Medical Care*, 45, 594-601.  
<https://doi.org/10.1097/mlr.0b013e31803bb4c1>
- Eisenberg, J., & Thompson, W. (2011). The effects of competition in improvisers' motivation, stress and creative performance. *Creativity Research Journal*, 23(2), 129 – 136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2011.571185>
- Erickson, M., Hanna, P., & Walker, C. (2021). The UK higher education senior management survey: A stactivist response to managerialist governance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(11), 2134-2151.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1712693>
- Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3), 282-284. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nbt.4089>
- Fabian, L., & Ross, M. (1984). The development of the sports competition trait inventory. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 7(1), 13-27.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1311945970/fulltextPDF/61EC1D55E9A142F2PQ/1?accountid=15181>
- Falchikov, N. (1986). Product comparisons and process benefits of collaborative peer group and self assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 11(2), 146-166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293860110206>
- Falchikov, N., & Goldfinch, J. (2000). Student peer assessment in higher education: A meta-analysis comparing peer and teacher marks. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 287-322. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003287>
- Fang, J., & O'Flaherty, B. (2020). *Orchestrating even more impartiality: Blind auditions led orchestras to hire more Asian musicians, too*. Columbia Program for

Economic Research. <https://econ.columbia.edu/working-paper/orchestrating-even-more-impartiality-blind-musicians-led-orchestras-to-hire-more-asian-musicians-too/>

- Fautley, M. (2010). *Assessments in Music Education*. Oxford University Press.
- Fautley, M., & Daubney, A. (2018). Inclusion, music education, and what it might mean. *British Journal of Music Education*, 35(3), 219-221.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051718000219>
- Feezell, R. (2013). *Sport, vulnerability and unhappiness*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Fisher, R. (2008). Debating assessment in music education. *Research and Issues in Music Education*, 6(1), 1-10. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ819200.pdf>
- Fleming, J. (2018). Recognizing and resolving the challenges of being an insider researcher in work-integrated learning. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 19(3), 311-340.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1196753.pdf>
- Flick, U. (2020). *Introducing research methodology* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Galderisi, S., Heinz, A., Kastrup, M., Beezhold, J., & Sartorius, N. (2015). Toward a new definition of mental health. *World Psychiatry*, 14(2), 231-233.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20231>
- Gall, T. L., Evans, D. R., & Bellerose, S. (2000). Transition to first-year university: Patterns of change in adjustment across life domains and time. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19(4), 544-567.  
<https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2000.19.4.544>
- Garcia, S. M., Tor, A., & Schiff, T. M. (2013). The psychology of competition: A social comparison perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(6), 634-650.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691613504114>
- Gardner, S. K., & Barnes, B. J. (2007). Graduate student involvement: Socialization for the professional role. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(4), 369-387.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0036>
- Gaunt H., & Westerlund H. (2013). Prelude: The case for collaborative learning in higher music education. In H. Gaunt & H. Westerlund (Eds.), *Collaborative learning in higher music education* (pp. 1–12). Ashgate.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315572642>

- Gelbgiser, D. (2018). College for all, degrees for few: For-profit colleges and socioeconomic differences in degree attainment. *Social Forces*, 96(4), 1785-1824. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy022>
- Giddens, A. (1976). *New rules of sociological method: A positive critique of interpretive sociologies*. Hutchinson.
- Gilbert, P., McEwan, K., Bellew, R., Mills, A., & Gale, C. (2009). The dark side of competition: How competitive behaviour and striving to avoid inferiority are linked to depression, anxiety, stress and self-harm. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 82, 123-136. <https://doi.org/10.1348/147608308x379806>
- Gillham, B. (2000). *Case study research*. Continuum.
- Ginsburgh, V. A., & van Ours, J. C. (2003). Expert opinion and compensation: Evidence from a musical competition. *The American Economic Review*, 93(1), 289-296. <https://doi.org/10.1257/000282803321455296>
- Gittings, G., Bergman, M., Shuck, B., & Rose, K. (2018). The impact of student attributes and program characteristics on doctoral degree completion. *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development*, 30(3), 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20220>
- Goldin, C., & Rouse, C. (2000). Orchestrating impartiality: The impact of “blind” auditions on female musicians. *American Economic Review*, 90(4), 715-741. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.90.4.715>
- Gray, D. E. (2013). *Doing research in the real world* (5th ed.). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Griffiths, A. (2020). Playing the white man’s tune: Inclusion in elite classical music education. *British Journal of Music Education*, 37(1), 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051719000391>
- Gross, S. A., & Musgrave, G. (2016). *Can music make you sick? A study into the incidence of musicians’ mental health. Part I*. University of Westminster. [https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/4196ca464d2cc76db38b7ab138837c26cd616ff8cdd46bffe2e82ab26b454bbe/832310/Gross\\_Musgrave.pdf](https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/4196ca464d2cc76db38b7ab138837c26cd616ff8cdd46bffe2e82ab26b454bbe/832310/Gross_Musgrave.pdf)
- Gross, S. A., & Musgrave, G. (2017). *Can music make you sick? A study into the incidence of musicians’ mental health. Part II*. University of Westminster. <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/fbc3b0a7fd80bcb64>



[8344f9d298414ece784f56ff9018d267fd77a7fce70a980/519636/Gross%20%26%20Musgrave%20%282017%29%20Can%20Muic%20Make%20You%20Sick%20Pt2.pdf](https://doi.org/10.16997/book43)

- Gross, S. A., & Musgrave, G. (2020). *Can music make you sick? Measuring the price of musical ambition*. University of Westminster Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.16997/book43>
- Gu, Q. (2009). Maturity and interculturality: Chinese students' experiences in UK higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 44(1), 37-52.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2008.01369.x>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Gulliver, E., & Byrom, N. (2014). *Peer support for student mental health*. Studentsmind.  
[https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/peer\\_support\\_for\\_student\\_mental\\_health.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/peer_support_for_student_mental_health.pdf)
- Ha, J. (2017). The careers of three experienced string teachers: Some observations. *International Journal of Music Education*, 35(4), 601-620.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761416689842>
- Haddon, E. (2019a). Perspectives of Chinese students on studying MA music programmes in a UK university. *Orfeu*, 4(2), 30-58.  
<https://doi.org/10.5965/2525530404022019030>
- Haddon, E. (2019b). University music students: Mental health and the academic supervisor. *Musicology Research Journal*, 1(6), 159-200.  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/146938/>
- Haddon, E. (in press). Negotiating learning and teaching cultures: Adaptive challenges facing MA Music Education graduates on their return to China. In R. Prokop & R. Reitsamer (Eds.), *Higher music education and employability in a neoliberal world*. Bloomsbury.
- Hagey, R.S. (1997). The use and abuse of participatory action research. *Chronic Diseases in Canada*, 18(1), 1-4.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1370159560?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
- Hallam, S., & Gaunt, H. (2012). *Preparing for success: A practical guide for young musicians*. Institute of Education Press.

- Hamilton, L. H., Kella, J. J., & Hamilton, W. G. (1992). Personality and occupational stress in elite performers. *Medical problems of performing arts*, 10(4), 86-89. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED353502.pdf>
- Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's wrong with ethnography?* Routledge.
- Hanna, G. S. & Dettmer, P. (2004). *Assessment for effective teaching: Using context-adaptive planning*. Pearson.
- Hanna, W. (2007). The new Bloom's taxonomy: Implications for music education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 108(4), 7-16. <https://doi.org/10.3200/aepr.108.4.7-16>
- Hanrahan, S. J., & Isaacs, G. (2001). Assessing self and peer assessment: The students' view. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 20, 53-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360123776>
- Harrison, S. D., Lebler, D., Carey, G., Hitchcock, M., & O'Brian, J. (2013). Making music or gaining grades? Assessment practices in tertiary music ensemble. *British Journal of Music Education*, 30(1), 27-42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051712000253>
- Hays, K. F. (2002). The enhancement of performance excellence among performing artists. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14(4), 299-312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200290103572>
- Hazell, C. M., Chapman, L., Valeix, S. F., Roberts, P., Niven, J. E., & Berry, C. (2020). Understanding the mental health of doctoral researchers: A mixed methods systematic review with meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. *Systematic Reviews*, 9, 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01443-1>
- Hendricks, K. S., Smith, T. D., & Legutki, A. R. (2016). Competitive comparison in music: Influences upon self-efficacy beliefs by gender. *Gender and Education*, 28(7), 918-934. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1107032>
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>
- Henley, J., & Barton, D. (2022). Time for change? Recurrent barriers to music education. *British Journal of Music Education*, 39(2), 203-217. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s026505172200016x>

- Hewitt, A. (2009). Musical styles as communities of practice challenges for learning, teaching and assessment of music in higher education. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 8(3), 329-337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022209339956>
- Hockey, J. (1995). Getting too close: A problem and possible solution in social science PhD supervision. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 23(2), 199-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069889508253005>
- Holden, M. T., & Lynch, P. (2004). Choosing the appropriate methodology: Understanding research philosophy. *The Marketing Review*, 4, 397-409. <https://doi.org/10.1362/1469347042772428>
- Holloway, I. (2008). Searching one's self: The autoethnography of a nurse teacher. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(4), 348-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987107088047>
- Holloway, I., & Biley, F. C. (2011). Being a qualitative researcher. *Qualitative Health Research*, 21(7), 968-975. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732310395607>
- Horstschräer, J. (2012). University rankings in action? The importance of rankings and an excellence competition for university choice of high-ability students. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(6), 1162-1176. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1983225>
- Horta, H., & Santos, J. M. (2016). The impact of publishing during PhD studies on career research publication, visibility, and collaborations. *Research in Higher Education*, 57, 28-50. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-015-9380-0>
- Houghton, A. (2019). Academic and departmental support. In N. Barden & R. Caleb, (Eds.), *Student mental health & wellbeing in higher education* (pp. 125-144). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529700435.n7>
- Hounsell, D., Falchikov, N., Hounsell, J., Klampfleitner, M., Huxham, M., Thompson, K., & Blair, S. (2007). *Innovative assessment across the disciplines: An analytical review of the literature*. Higher Education Academy. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/innovative-assessment-across-disciplines-analytical-review-literature>
- Houston, D., Meyer, L. H., & Paewai, S. (2006). Academic staff workloads and job satisfaction: Expectations and value in academe. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 28(1), 17-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800500283734>

- Houston, J., Harris, P., McIntire, S., & Francis, D. (2002). Revising the Competitiveness Index using factor analysis. *Psychological Reports, 90*(1), 31–34.  
<https://doi.org/10.2466/PRO.90.1.31-34>
- Huang, C. F. (2021). Positioning students as consumers and entrepreneurs: Student service materials on a Hong Kong university campus. *Critical Discourse Studies, 19*(6), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1945471>
- Hudson, J., & Day, M. C. (2012). Athletes' experiences of expressive writing about sport stressors. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 13*(6), 798-806.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.05.005>
- Hughes, G., Panjwani, M., Tulcidas, P., & Byrom, N. (2018). *Student mental health. The role and experiences of academics*. Students Mind.  
[https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/180129\\_student\\_mental\\_health\\_the\\_role\\_and\\_experience\\_of\\_academics\\_student\\_minds.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/180129_student_mental_health_the_role_and_experience_of_academics_student_minds.pdf)
- Humphrey, R., & McCarthy, P. (1999). Recognising difference: Providing for postgraduate students. *Studies in Higher Education, 24*(3), 371-386.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079912331379955>
- Hunter, D., & Russ, M. (1996). Peer assessment in performance studies. *British Journal of Music Education, 13*(1), 67-78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051700002953>
- Huxham, M., Campbell, F., & Westwood, J. (2012). Oral versus written assessments: A test of student performance and attitudes. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 37*(1), 125-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.515012>
- Jääskeläinen, T., López-Íñiguez, G., & Lehikoinen, K. (2020). Experienced workload, stress, and coping among professional students in higher music education: An explanatory mixed-method study in Finland and the United Kingdom. *Psychology of Music, 50*(6), 1853-1876. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03057356211070325>
- Jacklin, A., & Robinson, C. (2007). What is meant by 'support' in higher education? Towards a model of academic and welfare support. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 7*(2), 114-123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-3802.2007.00087.x>
- Jacobs, G. S. (2010). *The viability of music as an academic subject at secondary school level* [Master dissertation, University of South Africa]. University of South Africa Repository. <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/3696>

- Jain, T., & Kapoor, M. (2015). The impact of study groups and roommates on academic performance. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 97(1), 44-54.  
[https://doi.org/10.1162/REST\\_a\\_00454](https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00454)
- James, D., Biesta, G., Colley, H., Davies, J., Gleeson, D., Hodkinson, P., Maull, W., Postlethwaite, K., & Whalberg, M. (2007). *Improving learning cultures in further education*. Routledge.
- Janta, H., Lugosi, P., & Brown, L. (2014). Coping with loneliness: A netnographic study of doctoral students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 38(4), 553-571.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2012.726972>
- Johansen, G. (2021). The hidden curriculum in higher music education. In R. Wright, G. Johansen, P. A., Kanellopoulos, & P. Schmidt (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to sociology of music education* (pp. 300-311). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429504631-21-28>
- Johnson, C. (2012). Behavioral responses to threatening social comparison: From dastardly deeds to rising above. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6(7), 515-524. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00445.x>
- Jones, B. D., & Parkes, K. A. (2010). The motivation of undergraduate music students: The impact of identification and talent beliefs on choosing a career in music education. *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, 19(2), 41-56.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1057083709351816>
- Jones, J. W., Neuman, G., Altmann, R., & Dreschler, B. (2001). Development of the sports performance inventory: A psychological measure of athletic potential. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 15, 491-503.  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1007878802276>
- Jones-Davies, S. (2019). The legal position: Obligations and limits. In N. Barden, & R. Caleb (Eds.), *Student mental health & wellbeing in higher education* (pp. 18-39). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529700435.n2>
- Jørgensen, H. (2010). Higher music education institutions: A neglected arena for research? *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 186, 67-80.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/41110435>
- Juuti, S., & Littleton, K. (2010). Musical identities in transition, solo piano students' accounts of entering the academy. *Psychology of Music*, 38(4), 481-497.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735609351915>

- Kai, J. (2012). The origin and consequences of excess competition in education. A mainland Chinese perspective. *Chinese Education and Society*, 45(2), 8-20.  
<https://doi.org/10.2753/CED1061-1932450201>
- Kallio, A. A., Westerlund, H., Karlsen, S., Marsh, K., & Sæther, E. (2021). *The politics of diversity in music education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65617-1>
- Keaney, L. C., Kilding, A. E., Merien, F., & Dulson, D. K. (2018). The impact of sport related stressors on immunity and illness risk in team-sport athletes. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 21(12), 1192-1199.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2018.05.014>
- Keegan-Phipps, S. (2008). *Teaching folk: The educational institutionalization of folk music in contemporary England* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Newcastle]. Newcastle University Theses. <http://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/263>
- Kegelaers, J., Hoogkamer, L., & Oudejans, R. R. D. (2022). Practice and performance management strategies of emerging professional musicians in preparation for orchestra auditions. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 44(1), 175-191.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103x211054659>
- Kenny, D. T. (2009). The role of negative emotions in performance anxiety. In P. Juslin & J. Sloboda (Eds.), *Handbook of music and emotion: Theory, research, applications* (pp. 425-451). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199230143.003.0016>
- Kenny, D. T. (2011). *The psychology of music performance anxiety*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199586141.001.0001>
- Kenny, D. T., Driscoll, T., & Ackermann, B. (2014). Psychological well-being in professional orchestral musicians in Australia: A descriptive population study. *Psychology of Music*, 42(2), 210-232.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735612463950>
- Kessler, R. C., Amminger, G. P., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Alonso, J., Lee, S., & Bedirhan Ustun, T. (2007). Age of onset of mental disorders: A review of recent literature. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 20(4), 359-364.  
<https://doi.org/10.1097/yco.0b013e32816ebc8c>
- Kimpton, P. H., & Kimpton, A. (2019). Making assessment meaningful, measurable, and manageable in the secondary music classroom. In T. S. Brophy (ed.), *The Oxford*

- handbook of assessment policy and practice in music education* (pp. 325-350). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190248130.013.52>
- Kingsbury, H. (1988). *Music talent & performance: Conservatory cultural system*. Temple University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bsxh1>
- Klein, B., Meier, L. M., & Powers, D. (2017). Selling out: Musicians, autonomy, and compromise in the digital age. *Popular Music and Society*, 40(2), 222-238.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1120101>
- Kokotsaki, D., & Davidson, J. W. (2003). Investigating music performance anxiety among music college singing students: A quantitative analysis. *Music Education Research*, 5(1), 45-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800307103>
- Koopman, C. (2007). Community music as music education: On the educational potential of community music. *International Journal of Music Education*, 25(2), 151-163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0255761407079951>
- Kornelakis, A., & Petrakaki, D. (2020). Embedding employability skills in UK higher education: Between digitalization and marketization. *Industry and Higher Education*, 34(5), 290-297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422220902978>
- Krefting, L. (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: The assessment of trustworthiness. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 45(3), 214-222.  
<https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.45.3.214>
- Kuo, Y. (2011). Language challenges faced by international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 1(2), 38-42.  
<https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v1i2.551>
- Laidlaw, A., McLellan, J., & Ozakinci, G. (2016). Understanding undergraduate student perceptions of mental health, mental well-being and help-seeking behaviour. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(12), 2156-2168.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1026890>
- Lam, S., Yim, P., Law, J., & Cheung, R. (2004). The effects of competition on achievement motivation in Chinese classrooms. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74(2), 281-296. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709904773839888>
- Landau, A. T., & Limb, C. J. (2017). The neuroscience of improvisation. *Music Educators Journal*, 103, 27-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432116687373>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

- Leenknecht, M., Hompus, P., & van der Schaaf, M. (2019). Feedback seeking behaviour in higher education: The association with students' goal orientation and deep learning approach. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(7), 1069-1078. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1571161>
- Lempp, H., & Seale, C. (2004). The hidden curriculum in undergraduate medical education: Qualitative study of medical students' perceptions of teaching. *British Medical Journal*, 329, 770-773. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7469.770>
- Leong, S. (2010). Mentoring and research supervision in music education: Perspectives of Chinese postgraduate students. *International Journal of Music Education*, 28(2), 145-158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761410362940>
- Letts, R. (2006). *The protection and promotion of musical diversity*. International Music Council for UNESCO. [https://www.imc-cim.org/programmes/imc\\_diversity\\_report.pdf](https://www.imc-cim.org/programmes/imc_diversity_report.pdf)
- Levačić, R. (2004). Competition and the performance of English secondary schools: Further evidence. *Education Economics*, 12(2), 177-193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0964529042000239186>
- Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868-879. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/9r2k7>
- Levin, J. S. (2006). Faculty work: Tensions between educational and economic values. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(1), 62-88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2006.0004>
- Li, J., & De Luca, R. (2014). Review of assessment feedback. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(2), 378-393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.709494>
- Lindley, J., & Machin, S. (2016). The rising postgraduate wage premium. *Economica*, 83, 281-306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecca.12184>
- Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), 91-103. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>
- Long, T., & Johnson, M. (2000). Rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research. *Clinical Effectiveness in Nursing*, 4, 30-37. <https://doi.org/10.1054/cein.2000.0106>



- López-Iñiguez, G., & Bennett, D. (2021). Broadening student musicians' career horizons: The importance of being and becoming a learner in higher education. *International Journal of Music Education, 39*(2), 134-150.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761421989111>
- Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lowe, G. M. (2018). Competition versus cooperation: Implications for music teachers following students feedback from participation in a large-scale cooperative music festival. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(5), 78-94.  
<https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43n5.6>
- Lundine, J., Bourgeault, I. L., Clark, J., Heidari, S., & Balabanova, D. (2019). Gender bias in academia. *The Lancet, 393*(10173), 741-743. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(19\)30281-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(19)30281-8)
- MacDonald, R. A. R., Kreutz, G., & Mitchell, L. A. (Eds.). (2012). *Music, health and wellbeing*. Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199586974.001.0001>
- Mack, L. (2010). The philosophical underpinnings of educational research. *Polyglossia, 19*, 5-11.  
[https://en.apu.ac.jp/rcaps/uploads/fckeditor/publications/polyglossia/Polyglossia\\_V19\\_Lindsay.pdf](https://en.apu.ac.jp/rcaps/uploads/fckeditor/publications/polyglossia/Polyglossia_V19_Lindsay.pdf)
- MacNamara, Á., Holmes, P., & Collins, D. (2006). The pathway to excellence: The role of psychological characteristics in negotiating the challenges of musical development. *British Journal of Music Education, 23*(3), 285-302.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051706007066>
- MacNamara, Á., Holmes, P., & Collins, D. (2008). Negotiating transitions in musical development: The role of psychological characteristics of developing excellence. *Psychology of Music, 36*(3), 335-352.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735607086041>
- Maher, C., Hadfield, M., Hutchings, M., & de Eyto, A. (2018). Ensuring rigor in qualitative data analysis: A design research approach to coding combining NVivo with traditional material methods. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918786362>

- Mainhard, T., van der Rijst, R., van Tartwijk, T., & Wubbels, T. (2009). A model for the supervisor-doctoral student relationship. *Higher Education*, 58(3), 359-373. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9199-8>
- Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative researching*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Matei, R., Broad, S., Goldbart, J., & Ginsborg, J. (2018). Health education for musicians. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01137>
- Maunder, R. E. (2018). Students' peer relationships and their contribution to university adjustment: The need to belong in the university community. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(6), 756-768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1311996>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2009). Designing a qualitative study. In L. Bickman & D. Rog (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of applied social research methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp.214-254). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483348858.n7>
- McCormick, L. (2009). Higher, faster, louder: Representations of the international music competition. *Cultural Sociology*, 3(1), 5-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975508100669>
- McCormick, L. (2015). *Performing civility. International competitions in classical music*. Cambridge University Press.
- McPherson, G., & Hendricks, K. S. (2010). Students' motivation to study music: The United States of America. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 32(2), 201-213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103x10384200>
- Mehra, B. (2002). Bias in qualitative research: Voices from an online classroom. *The Qualitative Report*, 7(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2002.1986>
- Mendes, W. B., Blascovich, J., Major, B., & Seery, M. (2001). Challenge and threat responses during downward and upward social comparisons. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31(5), 477-497. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.80>
- Meng, Q., Li, J., & Zhu, C. (2021). Towards an ecological understanding of Chinese international students' intercultural interactions in multicultural contexts: Friendships, inhibiting factors and effects on global competence. *Current Psychology*, 40, 1517-1530. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00280-3>
- Mental Health First Aid England (2019). *Mental health statistics*. <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation/mental-health-statistics/>

- Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: Wielding a double-edge sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980601094651>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Miksza, P., Parkes, K., Russell, J. A., & Bauer, W. (2021). The well-being of music educators during the pandemic Spring of 2020. *Psychology of Music*, 50(4), 1152-1168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03057356211042086>
- Mills, J. (2004). Working in music: Becoming a performer-teacher. *Music Education Research*, 6(3), 245-261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461380042000281712>
- Minors, H. J., Burnard, P., Wiffen, C., Shihabi, Z., & Van Der Walt, J. S. (2017). Mapping trends and framing issues in higher music education: Changing minds/changing practices. *London Review of Education*, 15(3), 457-453. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.15.3.09>
- Mohrman, K., Ma, W., & Baker, D. (2008). The research university in transition: The emerging global model. *Higher Education Policy*, 21, 5-27. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300175>
- Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78, 137-144. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x>
- Moulton, S., & Clayton, J. (2021, June 18). *What is the music industry? Definition and facts*. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-the-music-industry-definition-facts.html>
- Muller, D., & Fayant, M. (2010). On being exposed to superior others: Consequences of self-threatening upward social comparisons. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4(8), 621-634. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00279.x>
- Myles, J., & Cheng, L. (2003). The social and cultural life of non-native English speaking international graduate students at a Canadian university. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 2, 247-263. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1475-1585\(03\)00028-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1475-1585(03)00028-6)
- Nagel, J. J. (1988). Identity and career choice in music. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, 12(2), 67-76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02258421>

- Neher, E. (2011). Conductor versus conductor. *The Hudson Review*, 63(4), 653-660.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27920615>
- Nerland, M. (2007). One-to-one teaching as cultural practice: Two case studies from an academy of music. *Music Education Research*, 9(3), 399-416.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800701587761>
- Nettl, B. (1995). *Heartland excursions: Ethnomusicological reflections on schools of music*. University of Illinois Press.
- Nicholls, A. R., & Polman, R. C. J. (2007). Coping in sport: A systematic review. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 25(1), 11-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410600630654>
- Nicholls, J. G. (1984). Achievement motivation: Conceptions of ability, subjective experience, task choice, and performance. *Psychological Review*, 91(3), 328–346. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.91.3.328>
- Nixdorf, I., Frank, R., & Beckmann, J. (2015). An explorative study on major stressors and its connection to depression and chronic stress among German elite athletes. *Advances in Physical Education*, 5(4), 255-262.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ape.2015.54030>
- Oliver, D. G., Serovich, J. M., & Mason, T. L. (2005). Constraints and opportunities with interview transcription: Towards reflection in qualitative research. *Social Forces*, 84(2), 1273-1289. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0023>
- Ommundsen, Y., Roberts, G. C., Lemyre, P., & Miller, B. W. (2005). Peer relationships in adolescent competitive soccer: Associations to perceived motivational climate, achievement goals and perfectionism. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 23(9), 977-989.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410500127975>
- Opdenakker, R. (2006). Advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 7(4), 1-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-7.4.175>
- Opsal, S. K. (2013). *Competition and extrinsic motivation in the band classroom: A review of literature and suggestions for educational practices* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Northern Iowa]. UNI Scholar Works.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt/13/>
- O'Reilly, K. (2009). *Key concepts in ethnography*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Ormrod, J. E. (2004). *Human learning* (4th ed.). Pearson Education Inc.

- Osborne, M. S., & McPherson, G. E. (2019). Precompetitive appraisal, performance anxiety and confidence in conservatorium musicians: A case for coping. *Psychology of Music, 47*(3), 451-462.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735618755000>
- Page, L. (2014, April 4). You are not alone: students stories of mental health. *The Guardian: Students*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/apr/04/students-share-stories-of-mental-health-universities>
- Paliaukiene, V., Kazlauskas, E., Eimontas, J., & Skeryte-Kazlauskiene, M. (2018). Music performance anxiety among students of the academy in Lithuania. *Music Education Research, 20*(3), 390-397.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2018.1445208>
- Papageorgi, I., Haddon, E., Creech, A., Morton, F., De Bezenac, C., Himonides, E., Potter, J., Duffy, C., Whyton, T., & Welch, G. (2010). Institutional culture and learning II: Interrelationships between perceptions of the learning environment and undergraduate musicians' attitude to performance. *Music Education Research, 12*(4), 427-446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2010.520432>
- Parkes, S. (2014). Fostering a sense of belonging: supporting the early formation of student identity as successful learners in higher education. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, 7*, 1-22.  
<https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i7.229>
- Patten, M. L. (2017). *Questionnaire research. A practical guide* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315265858>
- Payne, P. D., Burrack, F., Parkes, K. A., & Wesolowski, B. (2019). An emerging process of assessment in music education. *Music Educators Journal, 105*(3), 36-44.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432118818880>
- Pecen, E., Collins, D. J., & MacNamara, Á. (2018). "It's your problem. Deal with it". Performers' experiences of psychological challenges in music. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.02374>
- Pellegrino, K. (2009). Connections between performer and teacher identities in music teachers: Setting an agenda for research. *Journal of Music Teacher Education, 19*(1), 39-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1057083709343908>

- Pereira, S., Reay, K., Bottell, J., Walker, L., & Dzikiti, C. (2018). *University student mental health survey 2018*. The Insight Network. [https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/561110743bc7e45e78292140/5c7d4b5d314d163fecdc3706\\_Mental%20Health%20Report%202018.pdf](https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/561110743bc7e45e78292140/5c7d4b5d314d163fecdc3706_Mental%20Health%20Report%202018.pdf)
- Perkins, R. (2013). Learning cultures and the conservatoire: An ethnographically-informed case study. *Music Education Research*, 15(2), 196-213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2012.759551>
- Perkins, R. (2014). Learning cultures, creativities and higher music education institutions. In P. Burnard (Ed.), *Developing creativities in higher music education: International perspectives and practices* (pp. 223-233). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885223>
- Perkins, R., Reid, H., Araújo, L. S., Clark, T., & Williamon, A. (2017). Perceived enablers and barriers to optimal health among music students: A qualitative study in the music conservatoire setting. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00968>
- Petersen, S., & Camp, M. (2016). The musical self-concept of Chinese music students. *Frontiers of Psychology*, 7, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00776>
- Piper, R., & Byrom, N. (2017). *Student Voices in the development of a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing*. Students Minds. [https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/170901\\_student\\_voices\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/170901_student_voices_report_final.pdf)
- Pitt, E., & Norton, L. (2017). 'Now that's the feedback I want!' Students' reactions to feedback on graded work and what they do with it. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(4), 499-516. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1142500>
- Pitt, E., & Winstone, N. (2018). The impact of anonymous marking on students' perceptions of fairness, feedback and relationships with lecturers. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(7), 1183-1193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1437594>
- Pitts, S. E. (2003). What do students learn when we teach music? *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 2(3), 281-292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222030023005>

- Ploner, J. (2018). International students' transitions to UK Higher Education – revisiting the concept and practice of academic hospitality. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 17(2), 164-178.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240918786690>
- Ploskonka, J. (1993). The use of retrospective national data for institutional evaluation. In L. L. Baird (Ed.), *New directions for institutional research* (pp. 59-68). Jossey-Bass. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.37019938007>
- Pollard, E., Vanderlayden, J., Alexander, K., Borkin, H., & O'Mahony, J. (2021). *Student mental health and wellbeing. Insights from higher education providers and sector experts*. Institute for Employment Studies.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/996478/Survey\\_of\\_HE\\_Providers\\_Student\\_Mental\\_Health.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/996478/Survey_of_HE_Providers_Student_Mental_Health.pdf)
- Powell. B., Hewitt, D., Smith, G. D., Olesko, B., & Davis, V. (2020). Curricular change in collegiate programs: Toward a more inclusive music education. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 35, 1-21.  
<https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol35/iss1/16/>
- Powell, S. R. (2021). Competition, ideology, and the one-dimensional music program. *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, 20(3), 19-43.  
[http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Powell20\\_3.pdf](http://act.maydaygroup.org/articles/Powell20_3.pdf)
- Pownall, M., Harris, R., & Blundell-Birtill, P. (2022). Supporting students during the transition to university in COVID-19: Five key considerations and recommendations for educators. *Psychology Learning and Teaching*, 21(1), 3-18.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14757257211032486>
- Pyett, P. M. (2003). Validation of qualitative research in the “real world”. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(8), 1170-1179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303255686>
- Ramsden, P. (1997). The context of learning in academic departments. In F. Marton, D. Hounsell, & N. Entwistle (Eds.), *The experience of Learning. Implications for teaching and studying in higher education* (pp. 198-216). Scottish Academic Press. <http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/docs/ExperienceOfLearning/EoL13.pdf>
- Ratislavova, K., & Ratislav, J. (2014). Asynchronous email interview as a qualitative research method in the humanities. *Human Affairs*, 24(4), 452-460.  
<https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-014-0240-y>

- Richardson, J. T. E., Mittelmeier, J., & Rienties, B. (2020). The role of gender, social class and ethnicity in participation and academic attainment in UK higher education: An update. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(3), 346-362.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1702012>
- Rienties, B., Beusaert, S., Grohnert, T., Niemantsverdriet, S., & Kommers, P. (2012). Understanding academic performance of international students: The role of ethnicity, academic and social integration. *Higher Education*, 63(6), 685-700.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9468-1>
- Riley, J. M. (2012). Reducing anxiety: Studio strategies for performing salvation. *Music Educators Journal*, 98(3), 65-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432111434587>
- Ritchie, L., & Williamon, A. (2010). Measuring distinct types of musical self-efficacy. *Psychology of Music*, 39(3), 328-344.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735610374895>
- Robson, B. E. (2004). Competition in sport, music, and dance. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 19(4), 160-166. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2004.4026>
- Robson, C., & McCartan, K. (2016). *Real world research* (4th ed.). John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Robson, K. E., & Kenny, D. T. (2017). Music performance anxiety in ensemble rehearsals and concerts: A comparison of music and non-music major undergraduate musicians. *Psychology of Music*, 45(6), 868-885.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735617693472>
- Rohrer, T. P. (2002). The debate on competition in music in the twentieth century. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 21(1), 38-47.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/87551233020210010501>
- Russell, J. A., & Austin, J. R. (2010). Assessment practices of secondary music teachers. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 58(1), 37-54.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429409360062>
- Ryckman, R. M., Hammer, M., Kaczor, L., & Goid, J. A. (1990). Construction of a hypercompetitive attitude scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 55(3), 630-639. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5503&4\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa5503&4_19)
- Ryckman, R. M., Hammer, M., Kaczor, L., & Goid, J. A. (1996). Construction of a personal development competitive attitude scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 66(2), 374-385. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6602\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6602_15)



- Ryckman, R. M., Libby, C. R., van den Borne, B., Gold, A., & Lindner, M. A. (1997). Values of hypercompetitive and personal development competitive individuals. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 69*(2), 271-283.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6902\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6902_2)
- Saidin, K., & Yaacob, A. (2016). Insider researchers: Challenges and opportunities. *International Seminar on Generating Knowledge through Research, Malaysia, 849-854*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21070/picecrs.v1i1.563>
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Forbes-Mewett, H., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2012). International student security and English language proficiency. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 16*(5), 434-454.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311435418>
- Sawyer, R. K. (2008). Learning music from collaboration. *International Journal of Educational Research, 47*, 50-59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2007.11.004>
- Schatt, M. D. (2011). Achievement motivation and the adolescent musician: A synthesis of the literature. *Research & Issues in Music Education, 9*(1), 1-11.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ960087.pdf>
- Schmid, H. (1981). Qualitative research and occupational therapy. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 3*(2), 105-106.  
<https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.35.2.105>
- Schmidt, C. P., Zdzinski, S. F., & Ballard, D. L. (2006). Motivation orientations, academic achievement, and career goals of undergraduate music education majors. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 54*(2), 138-153.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/4101436>
- Schostak, J. (2002). *Understanding, designing and conducting qualitative research in education*. Open University Press.
- Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English Language Teaching, 5*(9), 9-16. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9>
- Scrivner, C. M. (2009). *The relationship between student achievement and teacher attitude: A correlational study* (Publication no 3351416) [Doctoral dissertation, Northcentral University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/305175883?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>

Seale, C. (1999). Quality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(4), 465-478.

<https://theism.org/documents/Seale%20%281999%29%20Quality%20in%20Qualitative%20Research.pdf>

Searby, M., & Ewers, T. (1996). Peer assessing composition in higher education. *British Journal of Music Education*, 13(2), 155-163.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051700003120>

Shein, P. P., & Chiou, W. (2011). Teachers as role models for students' learning styles. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 39(8), 1097-1104.

<https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2011.39.8.1097>

Sheldon, D. A. (1994). The effects of competitive versus noncompetitive performance goals on music students' ratings of band performances. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 121, 29-41.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40318665.pdf>

Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Silverman, D. (2010). *Doing qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sage Publications Ltd.

Sit, H. H. W. (2013). Characteristics of Chinese students' learning style. *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research*, 62(8), 36-39.

<http://www.ipedr.com/vol62/008-ICLMC2013-M10004.pdf>

Smith, A. L. (2003). Peer relationships in physical activity contexts: A road less traveled in youth sport and exercise psychology research. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 4, 25-39. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1469-0292\(02\)00015-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1469-0292(02)00015-8)

Smith, A. L., Balaguer, I., & Duda, J. L. (2006). Goal orientation profile differences on perceived motivational climate, perceived peer relationships, and motivation-related responses of youth athletes. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 24(12), 1315-1327.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02640410500520427>

Smith, A. L., Ulrich-French, S., Walker, E., & Hurley, K. S. (2006). Peer relationship profiles and motivation in youth sport. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 28(3), 362-382. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.28.3.362>

Smith, W. C., & Holloway, J. (2020). School testing culture and teacher satisfaction. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 32, 461-479.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09342-8>

Smithson, S., Devece, C. A., & Lapiedra, R. (2011). Online visibility as a source of competitive advantage for small- and medium-sized tourism accommodation enterprises. *Service Industries Journal*, 31(10), 1573-1587.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2010.485640>

Spahn, C., Richter, B., & Zschocke, I. (2002). Health attitudes, preventive behavior, and playing-related health problems among music students. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 17(1), 22-28. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2002.1004>

Spahn, C., Strukely, S., & Lehmann, A. (2004). Health conditions, attitudes toward study, and attitudes toward health at the beginning of university study: Music students in comparison with other student populations. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 19(1), 26-33. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2004.1005>

Spahn, C., Voltmer, E., Mornell, A., & Nusseck, M. (2017). Health status and preventive health behavior of music students during university education: Merging prior results with new insights from a German multicenter study. *Musicae Scientiae*, 21(2), 213-229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864917698197>

Spencer-Oatey, H., Dauber, D., Jing, J., & Wang, L. (2017). Chinese students' social integration into the university community: Hearing the students' voices. *Higher Education*, 74, 739-756. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0074-0>

Stake, R.E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Stallman, H. M. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, 45(4), 249-257.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2010.482109>

Stoeber, J., & Eismann, U. (2007). Perfectionism in young musicians: Relations with motivation, effort, achievement, and distress. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(8), 2182-2192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2007.06.036>

Streatfield, N. (2019). Professional support in higher education. In N. Barden & R. Caleb, (Eds.), *Student mental health & wellbeing in higher education* (pp. 145-166). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529700435.n8>

Study International Staff. (2019). *The difference between a conservatoire and a university*. <https://www.studyinternational.com/news/the-difference-between-a-conservatoire-and-a-university/>

- Subject benchmark statement: Music* (2019, December 18). Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. [https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-music.pdf?sfvrsn=61e2cb81\\_4](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-music.pdf?sfvrsn=61e2cb81_4)
- Suldo, S. M., & Shaffer, E. J. (2008). Looking beyond psychopathology: The dual-factor model of mental health in youth. *School Psychology Review, 37*(1), 52-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.2008.12087908>
- Sung, M., & Yang, S. (2008). Towards the model of university image: The influence of brand personality, external prestige, and reputation. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 20*(4), 357-376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260802153207>
- Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning. A common sense guide*. Jossey-Bass.
- Sverdlik, A., Hall, N. C., McAlpine, L., & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and well-being. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 13*, 361-388. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4113>
- Taber, K. S. (2007). *Classroom-based research and evidence-based practice*. Sage Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208734>
- Tan, L., Tjoeng, J., & Sin, H. X. (2021). "Ngeli": Flowing together in a Gamelan ensemble. *Psychology of Music, 49*(4), 804-816. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735620909482>
- Teachout, D. J. (2004). Incentives and barriers for potential music teacher education doctoral students. *Journal of Research in Music Education, 52*(3), 234-247. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3345857>
- Teachout, D. J. (2008). Incentives and barriers for completing music teacher education doctoral programs. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education, 178*, 7-20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40319335>
- Teague, A., & Smith, G. D. (2015). Portfolio careers and work-life balance among musicians: An initial study into implications for higher music education. *British Journal of Music Education, 32*(2), 177-193. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0265051715000121>
- The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (2019, June 24). *Elitist Britain 2019. The educational backgrounds of Britain's leading people*. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Elitist-Britain-2019.pdf>

- Thomas, G. (2013). *How to do your research project*. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Thorley, C. (2017). *Not by degrees. Improving student mental health in the UK's universities*. Institute for Public Policy Research.  
[https://www.ippr.org/files/2017-09/1504645674\\_not-by-degrees-170905.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/files/2017-09/1504645674_not-by-degrees-170905.pdf)
- Tierney, W. G., & Lanford, M. (2018). Institutional culture in higher education. In J. C. Shin & P. Teixeira (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of international higher education systems and institutions* (pp. 1-9). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1\\_544-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9553-1_544-1)
- Tight, M. (2017). *Understanding case-study research: Small-scale research with meaning*. Sage Publications Ltd. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781473920118>
- Tomlinson, M. (2017). Student perceptions of themselves as 'consumers' of higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(4), 450-467.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1113856>
- Trowler, P. (2011). *Researching your own institution*. British Educational Research Association. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/researching-your-own-institution-higher-education>
- Tsai, W., Lee, C. S., & Monte, V. (2021). Comparing the effects of emotional disclosure and peer helping writing on psychological distress among Chinese international students: The moderating role of rumination. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 77(7), 1556-1572. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23135>
- Tsang, E. W. K. (2014). Generalizing from research findings: The merits of case studies. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 16, 369-383.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12024>
- Turner, J., Hayward, R., Angel K., Fulford, B., Hall, J., Millard, C., & Thomson M. (2015). The history of mental health services in modern England: Practitioner memories and the direction of future research. *Medical History*, 59(4), 599-624.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2015.48>
- Universities UK (2018). *Minding our future: starting a conversation about the support of student mental health*. <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/minding-our-future-starting-a-conversation-support-student-mental-health.aspx>
- University of York. (n.d.). *Supervisors*.  
<https://www.york.ac.uk/students/studying/progress/supervisor/>

- University of York (n.d.). *Support, wellbeing and health*.  
<https://www.york.ac.uk/study/student-life/support/>
- University of York (n.d.). *Term dates*. <https://www.york.ac.uk/about/term-dates/>
- Unluer, S. (2012). Being an insider researcher while conducting case study research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1752>
- Usó-Doménech, J. L., & Nescolarde-Selva, J. (2016). What are belief systems? *Foundations of Science*, 21, 147-152.  
<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10699-015-9409-z.pdf>
- van Kemenade, J. F. L. M., van Son, M. J. M., & van Heesch, N. C. A. (1995). Performance anxiety among professional musicians in symphonic orchestras: A self-report study. *Psychological Report*, 77(2), 555-562.  
<https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1995.77.2.555>
- Vervainioti, A., & Alexopoulos, E. C. (2015). Job-related stressors of classical instrumental musicians: A systematic qualitative review. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 30(4), 197-202. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2015.4037>
- Virtanen, P., Nevgi, A., & Niemi, H. (2013). Self-regulation in higher education: Students' motivational, regulational and learning strategies, and their relationships to study success. *Studies for the Learning Society*, 3(1), 20-34.  
<https://doi.org/10.2478/sls-2013-0004>
- Vogel, E., Rose, J., P., Roberts, L., & Eckles, K. (2014). Social comparison, social media and self-esteem. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 3(4), 206-222.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/e512142015-699>
- Volkert, D., Candela, L., & Bernacki, M. (2018). Student motivation, stressors, and intent to leave nursing doctoral study: A national study using path analysis. *Nurse Education Today*, 61, 210-215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.11.033>
- Walford, G. (2001). *Doing qualitative educational research. A personal guide to the research process*. Antony Rowe Ltd.
- Walford, G. (2012). Researching the powerful in education: A re-assessment of the problems. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 35(2), 111-118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727x.2012.669523>
- Wang, I. K. H. (2018). Long-term Chinese students' transitional experiences in UK higher education: A particular focus on their academic adjustment.

- International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 30(1), 12-25. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1169827.pdf>
- Weaver, M. R. (2006). Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutor's written responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(3), 379-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930500353061>
- Wells, R., Outhred, T., Heathers, J. A. J., Quintada, D. S., & Kemp, A. H. (2012). Matter over mind: A randomised controlled trial of single-session biofeedback training on performance anxiety and heart rate variability in musicians. *Plos One*, 7(10), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0046597>
- Westerlund, H., & Karlsen, S. (2015). Music teachers' repertoire choices and the quest for solidarity. In C. Benedict, P. Schmidt, G. Spruce, & P. Woodford (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education* (pp. 371-387). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199356157.013.24>
- Whitelegg, D. (2002). Breaking the feedback loop: Problems with anonymous assessment. *Planet*, 5(1), 7-8. <https://doi.org/10.11120/plan.2002.00050007>
- Wilczewski, M., & Alon, A. (2022). Language and communication in international students' adaptation: A bibliometric and content analysis review. *Higher Education*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00888-8>
- Williamon, A., Ginsborg, J., Perkins, R., & Waddell, G. (2021). *Performing music research. Methods in Music Education, Psychology, and Performance Science*. Oxford University Press.
- Williamon, A., & Thompson, S. (2006). Awareness and incidence of health problems among conservatoire students. *Music and Psychology Research*, 34(4), 411-430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735606067150>
- Winter, G. (2000). A comparative discussion of the notion of 'validity' in qualitative and quantitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 4(3), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2000.2078>
- Winterson, J., & Russ, M. (2009). Understanding the transition from school to university in Music and Music Technology. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 8(3), 339-354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022209339962>
- Wittekind, A., Raeder, S., & Grote, G. (2010). A longitudinal study of determinants of perceived employability. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31, 566-586. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.646>

- Wojtas, O. (1998, 25 September). Feedback? No, just give us the answers. *Times Higher Education Supplement*.  
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/feedback-no-just-give-us-the-answers/109162.article>
- Wolters, C. A. (2004). Advancing achievement goal theory: Using goal structures and goal orientations to predict students' motivation, cognition, and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96(2), 236-250. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.96.2.236>
- World Health Organization (2014). *Mental health: a state of well-being*.  
[https://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental\\_health/en/](https://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/)
- Wristen, B.G. (2013). Depression and anxiety in university music students. *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 31(2), 20-27.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/8755123312473613>
- Yağışhan, N. (2009). A survey of music performance anxiety among Turkish music students. *Turkish Journal of Music Education*, 2(1), 1-11.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nihan-Yagisan/publication/274248977\\_A\\_Survey\\_of\\_Music\\_Performance\\_Anxiety\\_Among\\_Turkish\\_Music\\_Students/links/57dfdde808ae5272afd099d7/A-Survey-of-Music-Performance-Anxiety-Among-Turkish-Music-Students.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nihan-Yagisan/publication/274248977_A_Survey_of_Music_Performance_Anxiety_Among_Turkish_Music_Students/links/57dfdde808ae5272afd099d7/A-Survey-of-Music-Performance-Anxiety-Among-Turkish-Music-Students.pdf)
- Yazedjian, A., & Kolkhorst, B. B. (2007). Implementing small-group activities in large lecture classes. *College Teaching*, 55(4), 164-169.  
<https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.55.4.164-169>
- Yeravdekar, V. R., & Tiwari, G. (2018). Internationalization of higher education and its impact on enhancing corporate competitiveness and comparative skill formation. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 157, 203-209.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.11.023>
- Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). The Guildford Press.  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=2008479>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications. Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Yoshie, M., Kudo, K., Murakoshi, T., & Otsuki, T. (2009). Music performance anxiety in skilled pianists: Effects of social-evaluative performance situation on subjective,



- autonomic, and electromyographic reactions. *Experimental Brain Research*, 199, 117-126. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00221-009-1979-y>
- Yu, Y., & Moskal, M. (2018). Missing intercultural engagements in the university experiences of Chinese international students in the UK. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(4), 654-671. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2018.1448259>
- Zander, M. F., Voltmer, E., & Spahn, C. (2010). Health promotion and prevention in higher music education: Results of a longitudinal study. *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, 25(2), 54-65. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2010.2012>
- Zdzinski, S. F., & Horne, A. J. (2014). Musical autobiographies of preservice music educators. *Research Perspectives in Music Education*, 16(1), 32-43. <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/fmea/rpme/2014/00000016/00000001/art00005?crawler=true>
- Zhai, Y., & Du, X. (2020). Addressing collegiate mental health amid COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychiatry Research*, 288, 113003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113003>
- Zhang, Y., & Mi, Y. (2010). Another look at the language difficulties of international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 14(4), 371-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315309336031>
- Zhou, Y., & Todman, J. (2009). Patterns of adaptation of Chinese postgraduate students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4), 467-486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315308317937>
- Zhu, H., & O'Sullivan, H. (2020). Shhhh! Chinese students are studying quietly in the UK. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 59(3), 275-284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2020.1813603>

# **List of Appendices**

<b>Appendix A. Interviews: Participant information sheet and consent form .....</b>	<b>339</b>
<b>Appendix B. Questionnaires: Participant information sheet and consent form .....</b>	<b>342</b>
<b>Appendix C. Sample feedback form from questionnaire pilot test .....</b>	<b>345</b>
<b>Appendix D. List of links to the data set .....</b>	<b>346</b>
<b>Appendix E. Email interview questions .....</b>	<b>347</b>
<b>Appendix F. Questionnaire forms.....</b>	<b>352</b>
<b>Appendix G. Graphs: Likert scales BA students .....</b>	<b>376</b>
<b>Appendix H. Graphs: Likert scales PhD students .....</b>	<b>388</b>
<b>Appendix I. Graphs: Likert scales MA students.....</b>	<b>396</b>
<b>Appendix J. Interview questions: Instrumental and Vocal teachers .....</b>	<b>407</b>

## **Appendix A. Interviews: Participant information sheet and consent form**

### Interview consent form

Perceptions of competition among higher education music students and its relationship with mental health

\*Required

1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes  
 No

2. I have been able to ask any questions about the research prior to the interview and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes  
 No

3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at time without giving any reasons for my withdrawal. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- Yes  
 No

4. I understand that I am free to decline to answer any questions in the interview. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

5. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

6. I agree for this interview to be audio-recorded. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

7. I prefer my voice on the recordings to be disguised using audio processing techniques. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

8. I consent to some parts of my interview transcript, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

9. I wish to review my interview transcript before any further use. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

10. I give my consent to participate in the study under the conditions outlined in the Information Sheet. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

11. Please enter your full name and date \*

---

---

---

---

---

---

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

Google Forms

## **Appendix B. Questionnaires: Participant information sheet and consent form**

### **INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM**

Marianna Cortesi would like to invite you to take part in this questionnaire as part of her PhD research.

The research is entitled *Perceptions of competition among higher education music students and relationship with mental health* and aims at creating a deeper understanding of music students' perceptions of competition and how these might or might not affect their mental health. Participation in this questionnaire will substantially contribute to the positive outcome of this research project, and it is also an opportunity to reflect on your experience as an active musician of this department!

Participants will not directly benefit from participating in this project; however, this research will be an important contribution to existing literature on the relationship between music, mental health and the academic environment. The research findings will also have a specific relevance for the academic staff, music educators, professionals and policy makers who share the responsibility to provide an adequate support to higher music students; indeed, as this project is aimed at understanding the impact of competition on music students' mental well-being within the academic context, it might enhance the quality of the academic support provision through a greater knowledge of students' specific needs and requirements.

Completion of the questionnaire will take approximately 30 minutes (it might take slightly more if English is not your first language), and participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdrawal from the questionnaire at any time without any consequences. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer, and you will not have to give a reason. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be provided with a link to review all your responses before submitting, if you wish to.

Anonymity is provided through an automatically-generated code that does not allow the researcher nor third parties to identify the participant. Nevertheless, participants will be required to report their age range, nationality and year of study, to serve the scope of the research. Moreover, as participants will be required to answer some open-ended questions, they need to be aware of the possibility to reveal their own identity in case they decide to disclose potentially identifying attributes. Consequently, the risks of accidental identification are low but not absent, and all possible efforts to maintain anonymity will be made by the researcher: any potentially identifying information will be removed from the free-text comments. If you require additional information about confidentiality and anonymity concerns, please contact the researcher at [mc1739@york.ac.uk](mailto:mc1739@york.ac.uk).

To maintain fairness and respect, please avoid making explicit references to other people. All the information that you decide to share with the researcher, should concern yourself and **not** other people. In case your answers will allow to identify third parties, your questionnaire will be invalid and your responses will not be used as data.

After the completion of the questionnaire, responses will be securely stored by the researcher using the password protected University Cloud. Data will be destroyed after 10 years from their creation, in compliance with the University regulations.

In case you feel that you need support, here are some useful sources:

**Open Door** – a team of Mental Health Practitioner that provides free-of-charge support to University of York students who are experiencing psychological or mental health difficulties. Website: <https://www.york.ac.uk/students/health/help/open-door/>

**Crisis Resolution and Intensive Home Treatment Team (CRHT)** – a 24/7 service that provides specialist assessment for people who need urgent mental health care. Website: <https://www.tewv.nhs.uk/services/crisis-and-intensive-home-treatment-team/>

For any other relevant form of support you might need, please visit the **University of York Support, wellbeing and health** page <https://www.york.ac.uk/study/student-life/support/>

---

Have you read and understood the information provided by the researcher about the project, collection, storage, protection and destruction of the data, and anonymisation process?

- Yes, I have.
- No, I haven't. (Should you have further questions, please contact Marianna Cortesi at [mc1739@york.ac.uk](mailto:mc1739@york.ac.uk))

Do you give your consent for the information you will provide in this questionnaire to be used as research data and be presented in research papers, presentations and publications linked to this research project?

- Yes, I do.
- No, I don't. I will complete this questionnaire but I do not give consent for my data to be used for research purposes.

Do you understand that if you have any questions about the research you can contact the researcher, Marianna Cortesi at [mc1739@york.ac.uk](mailto:mc1739@york.ac.uk) or the academic supervisor, Dr Liz Haddon ([liz.haddon@york.ac.uk](mailto:liz.haddon@york.ac.uk))?

- Yes, I do.
- No, I don't.



## **Appendix C. Sample feedback form from questionnaire pilot test**

### **PILOT TEST**

#### **FEEDBACK ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

Thank you for completing the questionnaire. I'd really appreciate if you could take 5 minutes more to answer to these questions. You can write your answers in just one or two sentences. Please be completely honest in your answers as your honesty will be vital to design the best possible definitive version of the questionnaire.

1. What do you think of the length of the questionnaire?

2. Are the questions clear enough and explanatory (Feel free to refer to specific questions when answering, if you wish to)?

3. Are there any other aspects related to competition and mental health that you think might be relevant for undergraduate students in this department?

4. Do you have any other comments on the questionnaire?

Thank you very much again for completing the questionnaire and this feedback form. Your contribution is vital to the positive outcome of this research project, and you have all my gratitude for this.

Marianna

## **Appendix D. List of links to the data set**

All data sets. Link to the folder:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ii0K3JiAWday6bNnZSslo40H9sAB1-0l?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ii0K3JiAWday6bNnZSslo40H9sAB1-0l?usp=share_link)

Interview study. Link to the folder:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1YBAmicw5e61m0x0TCs4Vdtm31n1G8t5x?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1YBAmicw5e61m0x0TCs4Vdtm31n1G8t5x?usp=share_link)

Email interview. Link to the folder:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1jAgzuRvERLo47Xig2ZLWs7NFupJyZ916?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1jAgzuRvERLo47Xig2ZLWs7NFupJyZ916?usp=share_link)

Questionnaire study. Link to the folder:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Lm8Owf4i-w-flumqGiaLnEPDK-8Z5z34?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Lm8Owf4i-w-flumqGiaLnEPDK-8Z5z34?usp=share_link)

## Appendix E. Email interview questions

### QUESTIONS

**Q1. How long have you been teaching in the University of York Music Department?**

**Q2. Do you teach/have you taught in other institutions? If so, are these institutions also university music departments or conservatoire?**

**Q3. Do you regard competition as something that all music students in higher education experience?**

**Q4. How would you describe the atmosphere of this music department with regard to competition and students?**

**Q5. Are there any aspects of the department that you think foster competition among students? If so, which ones and why?**

**Q6. Have you ever had/do you have conversations with your students about their feelings of competition? Please explain.**

**Q7. Have you taught/do you currently teach international students in the UoY Music Department?**

**If the answer is 'yes': Do you think that the UK and international students that you teach have any differences in perceptions of competition? If so, please explain.**

**Q8. Have you ever taught any second-study jazz pianist in this department?**

**If the answer is yes: Have you observed any differences between first-study and second-study students in their perceptions of competition? If so, please explain.**

**Q9 - Have you observed any differences in students' perceptions of competition with regard to academic assessments (i.e. writing an essay) and performance assessments (i.e. end-of-year recitals)?**

**Q10. Do you think it is inevitable that music students will experience some form of competition in a musical professional capacity? If so, is competition valuable if experienced in higher music education as part of preparation for the profession?**

**Q11. Do you think that feelings of competition in the University of York Music Department impact on students' mental health? Please explain.**

**Q12. What would you do to support a student experiencing mental health issues arising from competition?**

**Q13: Do you think it is part of your role as an instrumental teacher to provide students with pastoral support?**

**If the answer is yes: how do you fulfil that? Do you feel supported by the department in the fulfilment of your pastoral role?**

**If the answer is no: why?**

**Q14. Would you like to see any changes in the institutional culture of the department in regard to students' perceptions of competition? If so, what kind of changes?**

**Q15. Do you think it might be useful for music students to attend any event in the department about competition? If so, what kind of events you think might be useful? Would you like to be involved?**

**Q16. Do you think that the situation resulted from the Covid-19 outbreak impacted on or changed your students' perceptions of competition? If so, how?**

**Q17. (*if applicable*) How do perceptions of competition in the UoY Music Department compare with those in other institutions where you teach/have taught?**

**Q18. Do you have any further comment on aspects of competition and mental health among your students?**

## **Appendix F. Questionnaire forms**

### **BA Music students' questionnaire**

---

Within this questionnaire, the word *musician* is used to refer to your experience as a person who engages with at least one musical activity including but not limited to performing, practising an instrument, researching in music, recording music, teaching music, composing, etc.

---

#### **SECTION 1**

##### **1. How would you describe your gender?**

Male

Female

Non-binary gender

Other (please specify)

Prefer not to answer

##### **2. What is your age range?**

18-25

26-32

32-40

Over 40

Prefer not to answer

##### **3. Which of the following best describes your nationality?**

UK

Country within the European Union

Non-European Union country

Prefer not to answer

##### **4. Is English your first language?**

Yes

No



Prefer not to answer

### **5. What is your current programme study?**

BA in Music

BA in Music and Sound Recording

Postgraduate Master (taught or research)

PhD

Prefer not to answer

---

## **SECTION 2**

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore the extent to which competition impacts on your life.

**1. Based on your life experiences and current understanding, how would you describe competition? (open question)**

**2. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).**

I regard myself as a competitive person.

I don't like competing against other people.

I try to avoid competing with others.

I often try to outperform other people.

I find competitive situations unpleasant.

I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense.

I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations.

I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me.

I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition.

---

## SECTION 3

Questions in this section are intended to explore your current perception of competition as a student in the music department, University of York. When answering please make reference to your own experiences and thoughts. The words academic activity refer to curricular activities within your programme of study that are distinct from the instrumental/vocal learning (e.g. seminar attendance, essay-writing, etc.) while performance activity refer to those curricular activities within your programme of study that are related to your one-to-one and ensemble instrumental/vocal learning.

### **1. How would you regard the atmosphere of this music department in terms of competition?**

Highly competitive

Moderately competitive

Low competitive

Not competitive at all

I prefer not to answer

**1a. If your answer to the previous question was 'highly competitive' or 'moderately competitive', could you explain what, in your opinion, are the most competitive aspects? (open question)**

**1b. If your answer to the previous question was 'low competitive' or 'not competitive at all', could you explain what, in your opinion, makes the atmosphere of this department not competitive? (open question)**

**2. Have your feelings or attitude towards competition changed since you have started studying in this music department? If so, how? (open question)**

**3. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):**  
**'In the context of my programme of study, my feelings of competition increase when':**

An assignment is worth a large number of credits.

My emotional investment toward an assignment is substantial.

I am taking part in a project/ module of my choice.

I feel an activity is linked to my career-related goals.

An assignment is academic-based rather than performance-based.

An assignment is performance-based rather than academic-based.

**4. If you have noticed any difference in the degree to which you experience feelings of competition towards academic and performance assignments, could you indicate which one you regard as the most competitive and why? (open question)**

**5. To what extent do you regard the performance opportunities provided by the department and student-led organisations to music students (e.g. concerto audition for second-year students, lunchtime concerts, ensemble participation, end-of-year performances, etc.) as potentially fostering competition among students? (open question)**

**6. Do you think that students enrolled in different programmes within this department (e.g. BA Music students, BA Music and Sound Recording students, Postgraduate students) perceive any kind of competition between each other? If so, how? (open question)**

**7. Are there any other aspects within this department in terms of opportunities, your career-goals, different musical activities (e.g. composing, analysis, musicology, etc.), atmosphere, relationship with your peers and staff that impact on your feelings of competition? (open question)**

**8. NON-NATIVE ONLY. Do you think that being taught and assessed in your second language impacts on your feelings of competition towards yourself and/or your peers? If so, how? (open question)**

**9. How well do you think the word 'competitive' accurately represents the professional musical life that you hope to undertake? (open question)**

**10. Which measures or strategies, if any, do you put in place to cope with the emotional demands of competitiveness within your studies? (open question)**

**10a. Following-up on the previous question, are these measures or strategies different for academic and performance activities? (open question)**

**11. In your experience, does social media have an impact on your feelings of competition within this department? (open question)**

---

## SECTION 4

This section is intended to investigate your experience of competition in relation to the academic and performance assessments that you undertake and the feedback that you receive within this music department, University of York.

**1. SECOND AND THIRD YEAR ONLY. Comparing your current year with your first year, have you noticed any change in your perceptions of competition in relation to assessments and feedback? If so, what changes have you identified? (open question)**

**2. In your experience, do you think there is a relationship between the type of assessment –formative or summative – and your feelings of competition towards that assessment? Feel free to expand on your choice of answer.**

Yes

No

Unsure

I prefer not to answer

**3. In your personal view, which type of assessment do you regard as the most competitive, if any? If you want, you can be more specific on the type of assessment (e.g. written work, end-of-year performance, etc.)**

Academic assessments

Performance assessments

I do not notice any particular difference

I prefer not to answer

**3a. If your answer to the previous question was ‘academic assessment’ or ‘performance assessment’, could you please explain why you think so? (open question)**

**4. In your experience, did your feelings of competition within this department impact on your ability to perform well in your curricular assessments? If so, are there any differences for academic and performance assessments? (open question)**

**5. In your experience, does sharing the results of the assessments with your peers impact on your feelings of competition? If so, how? (open question)**

**6. Do you regard the feedback you receive as a tool that might foster some form of competition among students? If so, how? (open question)**

---

## SECTION 5

This section of the questionnaire is intended to investigate the relationship between your mental wellbeing and experiences of competition within this university. Please feel free not answer any question you would not like to.

**1. Please, rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).**

I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help.

In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition.

I developed a mental health condition while at university.

I often feel worried or anxious.

I often feel isolated.

I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well in my academic assessments.

I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my instrument/voice.

**2. Do you consider competition as an aspect of people’s lives that might impact on their mental health? If so, how? (open question)**

**3. Have you ever perceived any changes in your mental health related to feelings of competition experienced in this department? If so, please explain. (open question)**

**4. Who, if any, would you feel comfortable in talking to about aspects and feelings of competition related to your activities within this department? Feel free to tick more than one option, if relevant.**

Peers

Academic supervisor

Performance supervisor

Instrumental/vocal teacher

Other members of the academic staff

Other members of the administrative staff

Others (please specify without providing their names)

None

I prefer not to answer

**4a. Following up on the previous question, could you explain why you feel comfortable in being open with these people, if any, about aspects of competition? (open question)**

**5. Do you think that feelings of competition might impact on your confidence to succeed within a professional capacity? Please explain. (open question)**

---

## SECTION 6

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore your thoughts and perceptions about support, openness and availability of this music department and the University of York to discuss competition and its effects among students.

**1. Are there any changes you would like to see in this department's attitude towards students' feelings of competition and mental health? If so, please describe. (open question)**

2. Do you think that sessions on students' experience of competition and mental health could be a valuable resource for music students from this department?

Yes

No

I am not sure

I prefer not to answer

2a. In relation to the previous question, do you have any suggestion on what kind of sessions you would like to see, if any? (e.g. student-led sessions, departmental workshops, etc.) (open question)

3. Are there any other services provided by the University with whom you would feel comfortable talking about feelings of competition within your studies (e.g. members of YUSU, Open Door team, members of specific societies, Careers Service team, college members, etc.)? (open question)

4. Do you think that the departmental measures put in place to guarantee equality and transparency in assessment have any impact on reducing the sense of competition among students (e.g. moderation process, anonymity, etc.)? (open question)

5. Considering the current unprecedented situation, does the Covid-19 lockdown impact on your perceptions of competition as a PhD music student? And if so, how?

6. Do you have any further comments on any aspect of competition within this music department? (open question)

**END OF QUESTIONNAIRE**

---

## PhD Music students' questionnaire

---

Within this questionnaire, the word *musician* is used to refer to your experience as a person who engages with at least one musical activity including but not limited to performing, practising an instrument, researching in music, recording music, teaching music, composing, etc.

---

### SECTION 1

#### 1. How would you describe your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary gender

Other (please specify)

I prefer not to answer

#### 2. What is your age range?

18-25

26-32

32-40

Over 40

I prefer not to answer

#### 3. Which of the following best describes your nationality?

UK

Country within the European Union

Non-European Union country

I prefer not to answer

#### 4. Is English your first language?

Yes

No

I prefer not to answer



**5. Are you currently registered as a full-time or part-time student?**

Full-time

Part-time

I prefer not to answer

**6. What is the funding status of your PhD?**

Fully funded

Partly funded

Self-funded

I prefer not to answer

---

**SECTION 2**

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore the extent to which competition impacts on your life.

**1. How would you describe your past experiences of competition as a musician before starting your PhD? Feel free to make reference to as many aspects as you like (e.g. research, performance, composition, etc.) (open question)**

**2. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).**

I regard myself as a competitive person.

I don't like competing against other people.

I try to avoid competing with others.

I often try to outperform other people.

I find competitive situations unpleasant.

I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense.

I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations.

I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me.

I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition.

---

### SECTION 3

Questions in this section are intended to explore your current perception of competition as a research student in this department. When answering please make reference to your own experiences and thoughts.

**1. How would you regard the atmosphere of this music department in terms of competition?**

Highly competitive

Moderately competitive

Not very competitive

Not competitive at all

I prefer not to answer

**1a. ANSWERED 'HIGHLY COMPETITIVE' OR 'MODERATELY COMPETITIVE'. Could you explain what, in your opinion, are the most competitive aspects? (open question)**

**1b. ANSWERED 'NOT VERY COMPETITIVE' OR 'NOT COMPETITIVE AT ALL'. Could you explain what, in your opinion, makes the atmosphere of this department not competitive? (open question)**

**2. Thinking back to your experience as an undergraduate student (and master student, if relevant), have your feelings or attitude towards competition changed since you have started your PhD programme? If so, how, and why? (open question)**

**3. In your view, do you think that there is a sense of competition among the community of research students within this department? (open question)**

**4. Have you ever had the chance to meet a wider research community of specialists in your area outside this music department? (e.g. at national/international conferences, at dedicated events, through social media, etc.)**

Yes

No

I prefer not to answer

4a. ANSWERED 'YES' TO QUESTION 4. Have you noticed any differences in the degree to which you experience feelings of competition within the wider research community and the research community of students in this music department? Please explain. (open question)

5. Have you ever experienced any sense of competition in relation to the funding status of your PhD (e.g. self-competition, competition with other students funded by the same sponsor, competition towards a wider research community, etc.)? If so, why?

Yes

To some extent

No

I prefer not to answer

6. Do/Might you feel at ease in discussing feelings of competition related to your experience in the department with your supervisor? Please feel free to give further detail. (open question)

7. Are there any other aspects within this department in terms of working opportunities, use of social media, engagement with musical activities (e.g. performing, composing, analysis, musicology, etc.), atmosphere, relationships with other students and staff that impact on your feelings of competition? (open question)

8. Which measures or strategies, if any, do you use to cope with the emotional demands of any competitiveness within your research? (open question)

9. NON-ENGLISH NATIVE ONLY. Does researching in your second language affect your feelings of competition towards yourself and/or your peers in this department? If so, how? (open question)

## SECTION 4

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore your perceptions of competition in relation to your current work experience and intended career prospects at the end of your PhD programme.

**1. What do you aspire to in your future professional life? (open question)**

**2. How well do you think the word 'competitive' accurately represents the professional musical life that you hope to undertake? (open question)**

**3. Have you ever considered or decided to give up on a potential career path that you were interested in because you regarded it as too competitive? Feel free to expand on that, if you wish.**

Yes

No

Unsure

I prefer not to answer

**4. In your opinion, how might doing a PhD help or not help you to cope with competitiveness in the workplace you aspire to be working in? (open question)**

**5. Do you think there are any differences in the degree of competitiveness experienced inside academia and outside academia within the music field? If so, what these differences might be?**

Yes

To some extent

No

I prefer not to answer

**5a. ANSWERED 'YES' OR 'TO SOME EXTENT' TO QUESTION 5. Does the difference in the degree of competitiveness experienced inside and outside academia influence the professional life you hope to undertake? (open question)**

**6. Are you currently employed or have you been previously employed by the University of York as a Graduate Teaching Assistant?**

Yes

No

I prefer not to answer

**6a. ANSWERED 'YES' TO QUESTION 6. Have you ever experienced feelings of competition in relation to your employment as a GTA? If so, please describe. (open question)**

**7. Have you ever attended a TAP meeting, given public talks (formal or informal, inside and outside your department), presentations, posters or flash talks about your PhD project?**

Yes

No

I prefer not to answer

**7a. ANSWERED 'YES' TO QUESTION 7. Did any of these experiences (TAP meeting, talks, presentations, posters or flash talks) have an impact on your feelings of competition? If so, how? (open question)**

---

## SECTION 5

This section of the questionnaire is intended to investigate the relationship between your mental wellbeing and experiences of competition within this university. Please feel free not answer any question you would not like to.

**1. Please, rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).**

I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help.

In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition.

I developed a mental health condition while at university.

I often feel worried or anxious.

I often feel isolated.

I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well in my academic assessments.

I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my instrument/voice.

**2. Do you consider competition as an aspect of people's lives that might impact on their mental health? If so, how? (open question)**

**3. Have you ever perceived any changes in your mental health related to feelings of competition experienced as a PhD student? If so, can you describe the competitive aspects you felt and say how these affect your mental health? (open question)**

**4. In your experience, do your feelings of competition within this department impact on your ability to perform well in your PhD research? If so, how? (open question)**

**5. Who, if any, would you feel comfortable in talking to about aspects and feelings of competition related to your musical activities? Could you also explain why you feel comfortable with them? Feel free to tick more than one option.**

Peers

Academic supervisor

Other members of the academic staff

Members of the administrative staff

Others (please specify without providing their names)

People from the wider research community

None

---

## SECTION 6

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore your thoughts and perceptions about support, openness and availability of this music department and the University of York to discuss competition and its effects among students.

**1. Do you think that sessions on students' experience of competition and mental health could be a valuable resource for music students from this department?**

Yes

No

Unsure

I prefer not to answer

1a. In relation to the previous question, do you have any suggestion on what kind of sessions you would like to see, if any? (e.g. student-led sessions, departmental workshops, etc.) (open question)

2. Are there any changes you would like to see in this department's attitude towards PhD students' feelings of competition and mental health? If so, please describe. (open question)

3. Are there any other services provided by the University with whom you would feel comfortable talking about feelings of competition within your studies (e.g. members of YUSU, Open Door team, members of specific societies, Careers Service team, college members, etc.)? (open question)

4. Considering the current unprecedented situation, does the Covid-19 lockdown impact on your perceptions of competition as a PhD music student? And if so, how?

5. Do you have any further comments on any aspect of competition within this music department? (open question)

**END OF QUESTIONNAIRE**

---

## MA Music students' questionnaire

---

Within this questionnaire, the word *musician* is used to refer to your experience as a person who engages with at least one musical activity including but not limited to performing, practising an instrument, researching in music, recording music, teaching music, composing, etc.

---

### SECTION 1

#### 1. How would you describe your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary gender

Other (please specify)

Prefer not to answer

#### 2. What is your age range?

18-25

26-32

32-40

Over 40

Prefer not to answer

#### 3. Which of the following best describes your nationality?

UK

Country within the European Union

Non-European Union country

Prefer not to answer

#### 4. Is English your first language?

Yes

No



Prefer not to answer

**5. In which country have you attended your undergraduate degree?**

UK

In a country within the European Union (e.g. Italy, France, Cyprus)

In a country outside the European Union (e.g. China, US, South Africa)

I prefer not to answer

**6. In which MA course are you enrolled? (open question)**

---

**SECTION 2**

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore the extent to which competition impacts on your life.

**1. How would you describe your past experiences of competition as a musician before starting your MA? Feel free to make reference to as many aspects as you like (e.g. performance, teaching, composition, recording, researching, etc.). (open question)**

**2. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).**

I regard myself as a competitive person.

I don't like competing against other people.

I try to avoid competing with others.

I often try to outperform other people.

I find competitive situations unpleasant.

I tend to avoid competitive situations as they make me feel stressed or tense.

I feel capable of handling the pressure in explicitly competitive situations.

I tend to compare my achievements with those obtained by other people at the same level as me.

I tend to miss out on important opportunities for my career when they involve some kinds of competition.

---

### SECTION 3

Questions in this section are intended to explore your current perception of competition as a student in the Music Department, University of York. When answering please make reference to your own experiences and thoughts.

#### **1. How would you regard the atmosphere of this music department in terms of competition?**

Highly competitive

Moderately competitive

Not very competitive

Not competitive at all

I prefer not to answer

**1a. ANSWERED 'HIGHLY COMPETITIVE' OR 'MODERATELY COMPETITIVE'. Could you explain what, in your opinion, are the most competitive aspects? (open question)**

**1b. ANSWERED 'NOT VERY COMPETITIVE' OR 'NOT COMPETITIVE AT ALL'. Could you explain what, in your opinion, makes the atmosphere of this department not competitive? (open question)**

**2. Thinking back to your experience as an undergraduate student, have your feelings or attitude towards competition changed since you have started your MA programme? If so, how, and why? (open question)**

**3. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):  
'In the context of my programme of study, my feelings of competition increase when':**

An assessment is worth a large number of credits.

My emotional investment toward an assignment is substantial.

I am taking part in a project/ module of my choice.

I feel an activity is linked to my career-related goals.

An activity is academic-based.

An assignment is non academic-based (e.g. teaching, performing, recording, etc.).

**4. To what extent do you regard the opportunities provided by the department and student-led organisations to music students (e.g. lunchtime concerts, ensemble participation, MEG activities, etc.) as potentially fostering competition among students? (open question).**

**5. Which other aspects within this department impact on your feelings of competition, if any? Feel free to tick as many options as you like and expand on your choices.**

Social media

Specific musical activities

Relationship with your peers

Relationship with the staff

Other (please specify)

None

**6. How well do you think the word 'competitive' accurately represents the professional musical life that you hope to undertake? (open question)**

**7. Which measures or strategies, if any, do you put in place to cope with the emotional demands of competitiveness within your studies? (open question)**

**8. NON ENGLISH NATIVE ONLY. How do you think that being taught and assessed in your second language affects your feelings of competition towards yourself and/or your peers in this department? (open question)**

**9. ONLY RESPONDENTS WHO DID THEIR UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES NOT IN THE UK. In the context of your study, have you noticed any differences between the level of competition you experienced in this country and in the country where you attended your undergraduate? Please explain. (open question)**

---

## SECTION 4

This section is intended to investigate your experience of competition in relation to the academic and performance assessments that you undertake and the feedback that you receive within this music department, University of York.

**1. Comparing your current MA with your undergraduate (and previously attended MA, if relevant), have you noticed any change in your perceptions of competition in relation to assessments and feedback? If so, what changes have you identified? (open question)**

**2. In your experience, do you think there is a relationship between the type of assessment –formative or summative – and your feelings of competition? Feel free to expand on your choice of answer.**

Yes

No

Unsure

I prefer not to answer

**3. Are there any specific types of assessment in the context of your current MA programme here at York that more than others you think foster a sense of competition among students? (e.g. performance assessments, assessed lessons, commentaries, presentation, etc.). (open question).**

**4. In your experience, have your feelings of competition within this department impacted on your ability to perform well in your curricular assessments? Feel free to expand on your choice.**

Yes

No

I prefer not to answer

**5. In your experience, does sharing the results of the assessments with your peers impact on your feelings of competition? If so, how? (open question)**

**6. Is it important for you to have a sense of how well you are doing in assessments compared with other students taking the same module? (open question)**

**7. How do you find out how your results compare with those of your peers? (open question)**

**8. Do you regard the feedback you receive as something that might foster some form of competition among students? If so, how? (open question).**

---

## SECTION 5

This section of the questionnaire is intended to investigate the relationship between your mental wellbeing and experiences of competition within this university. Please feel free not answer any question you would not like to.

**1. Please, rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).**

I have had a personal, emotional, behavioural or mental health problem for which I needed professional help.

In the past, I was diagnosed with a mental health condition.

I developed a mental health condition while at university.

I often feel worried or anxious.

I often feel isolated.

I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well in my academic assessments.

I perceive my mental health to be highly dependent on my ability to perform well on my instrument/voice.

**2. Do you consider competition as an aspect of people's lives that might impact on their mental health? If so, how? (open question)**

**3. Have you ever perceived any changes in your mental health related to feelings of competition experienced in this department? If so, please explain. (open question)**

**4. Who, if any, would you feel comfortable in talking to about aspects and feelings of competition related to your activities within this department? Could you also explain why you feel comfortable with them? Feel free to tick more than one option, if relevant.**

Peers

Academic supervisor

Other members of the academic staff

Members of the administrative staff

Others (please specify without providing their names)

People from the wider research community

None

I prefer not to answer

**5. Following up on the previous question, could you explain why you would feel comfortable in being open with these people about aspects of competition? (open question)**

**6. Do you think that feelings of competition might impact on your confidence to succeed within a professional capacity? Please explain. (open question)**

---

## SECTION 6

This section of the questionnaire is intended to explore your thoughts and perceptions about support, openness and availability of this music department and the University of York to discuss competition and its effects among students.

**1. Do you think that sessions on students' experience of competition and mental health could be a valuable resource for music students from this department?**

Yes

No

Unsure

I prefer not to answer

**1a. In relation to the previous question, do you have any suggestion on what kind of sessions you would like to see, if any? (e.g. student-led sessions, departmental workshops, etc.) (open question)**

**2. To whom of the following would you feel comfortable talking about feelings of competition within your studies, if any? Feel free to tick as many options as you like and expand on your choices.**

GSA

YUSU

Open Door team

Members of specific societies

Career Service

College staff

Other (please specify)

I prefer not to answer

**3. Do you think that the departmental policies that guarantee equality and transparency in assessments help to reduce the sense of competition among students (e.g. moderation process, anonymity, etc.)? (open question)**

**4. Considering the current unprecedented situation, does the Covid-19 lockdown impact on your perceptions of competition as a higher education music student? And if so, how? (open question)**

**5. Do you have any further comments on any aspect of competition within this music department? (open question)**

**END OF QUESTIONNAIRE**

---

## Appendix G. Graphs: Likert scales BA students

### Graphic representation of Table 5.2

Table 5.2: Statement 1

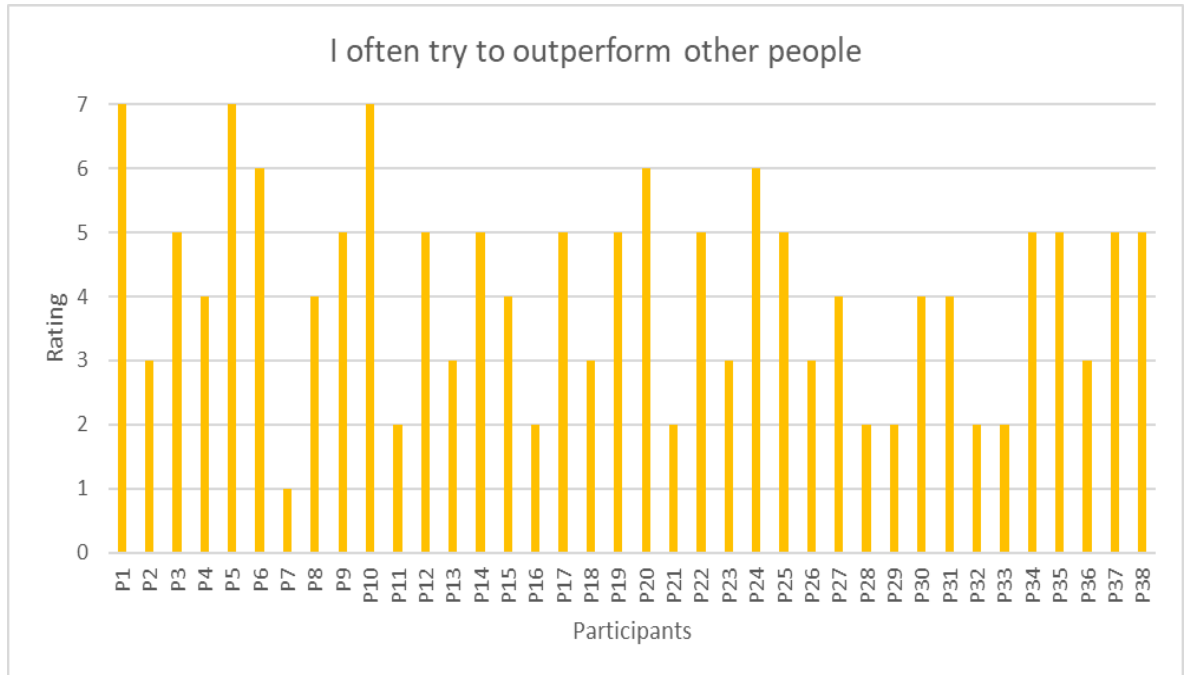


Table 5.2: Statement 2

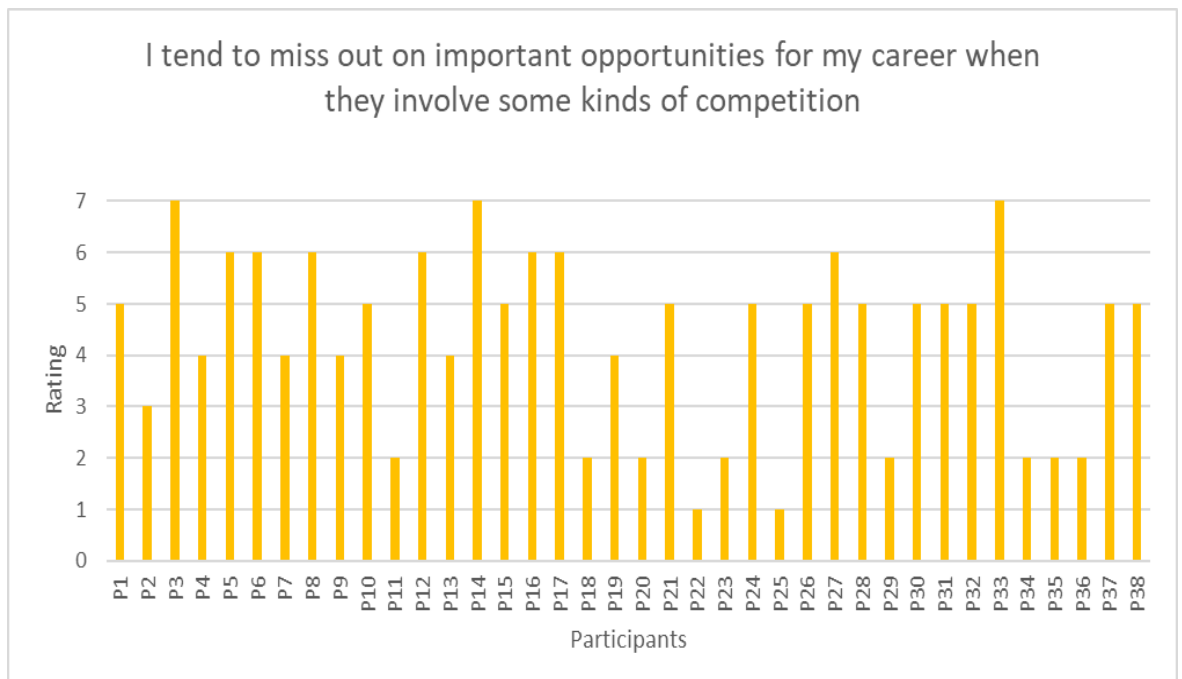




Table 5.2: Statement 3

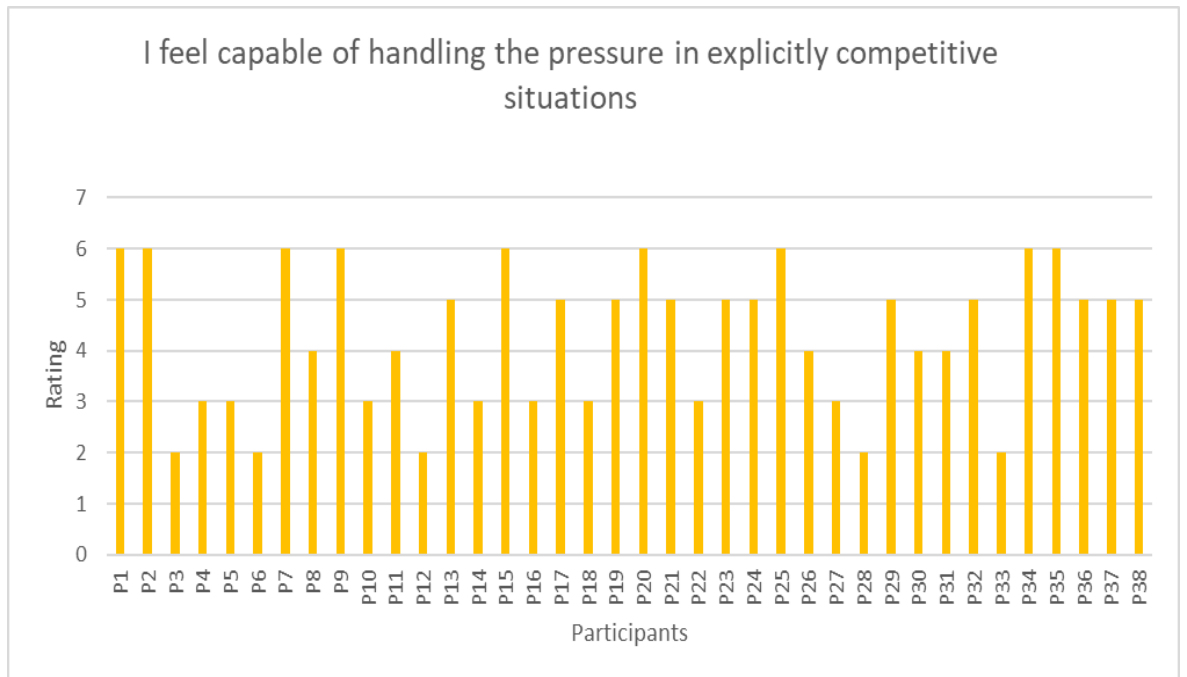


Table 5.2: Statement 4

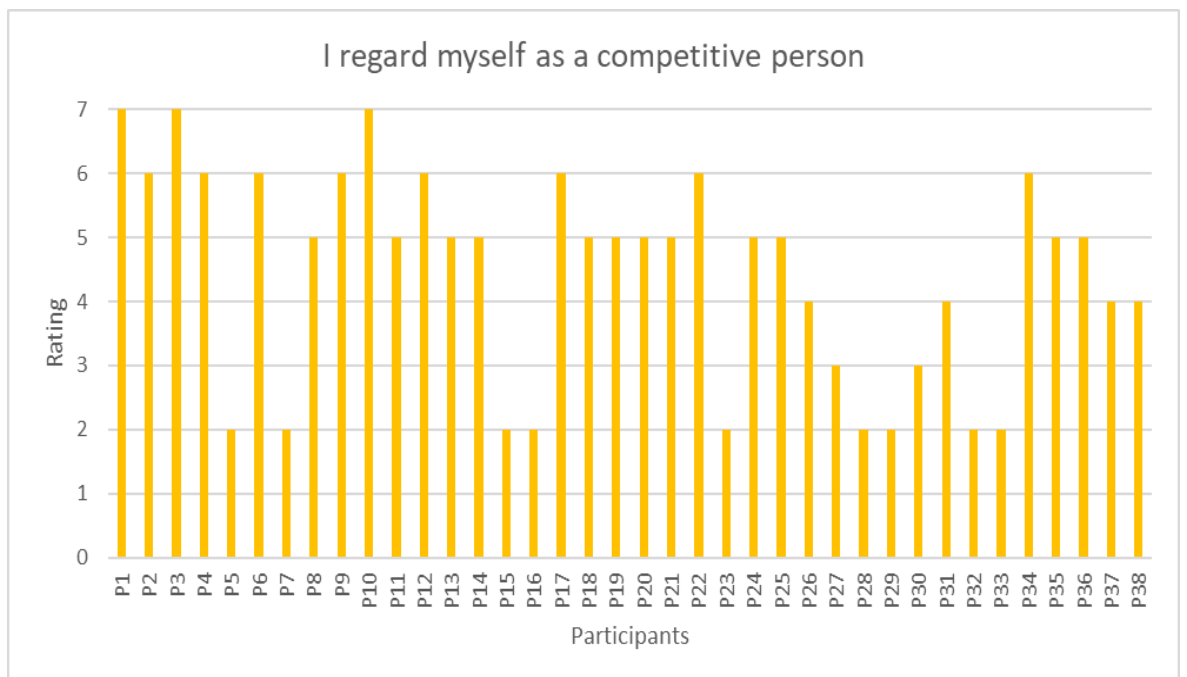


Table 5.2: Statement 5

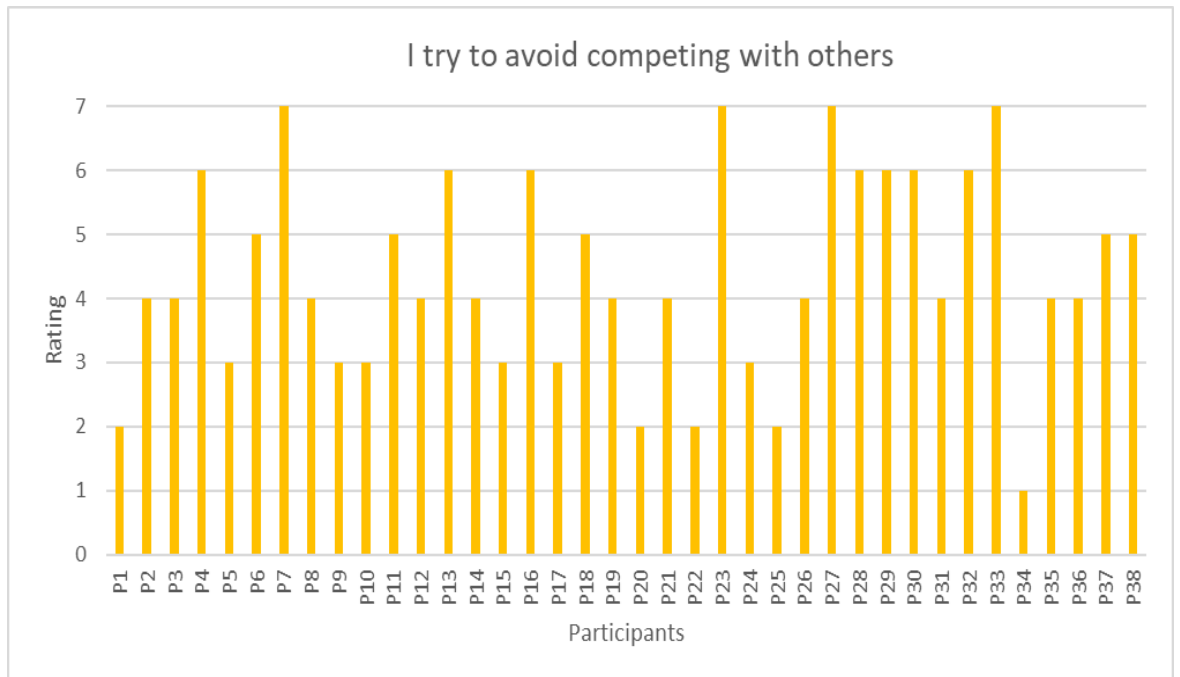


Table 5.2: Statement 6

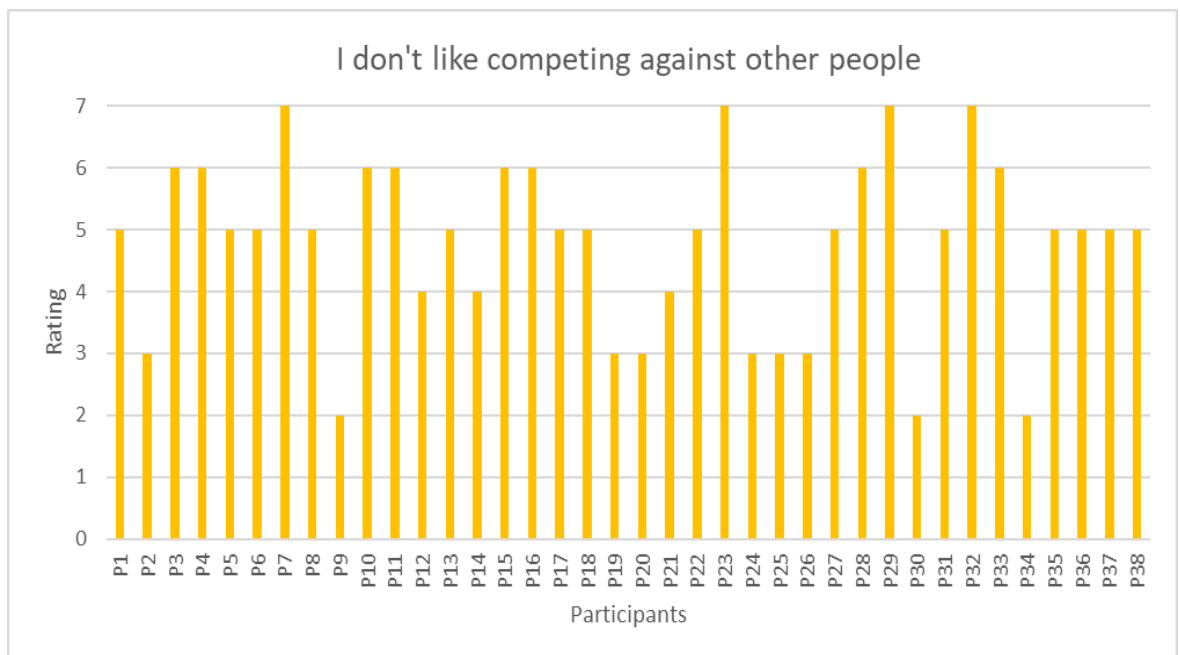


Table 5.2: Statement 7

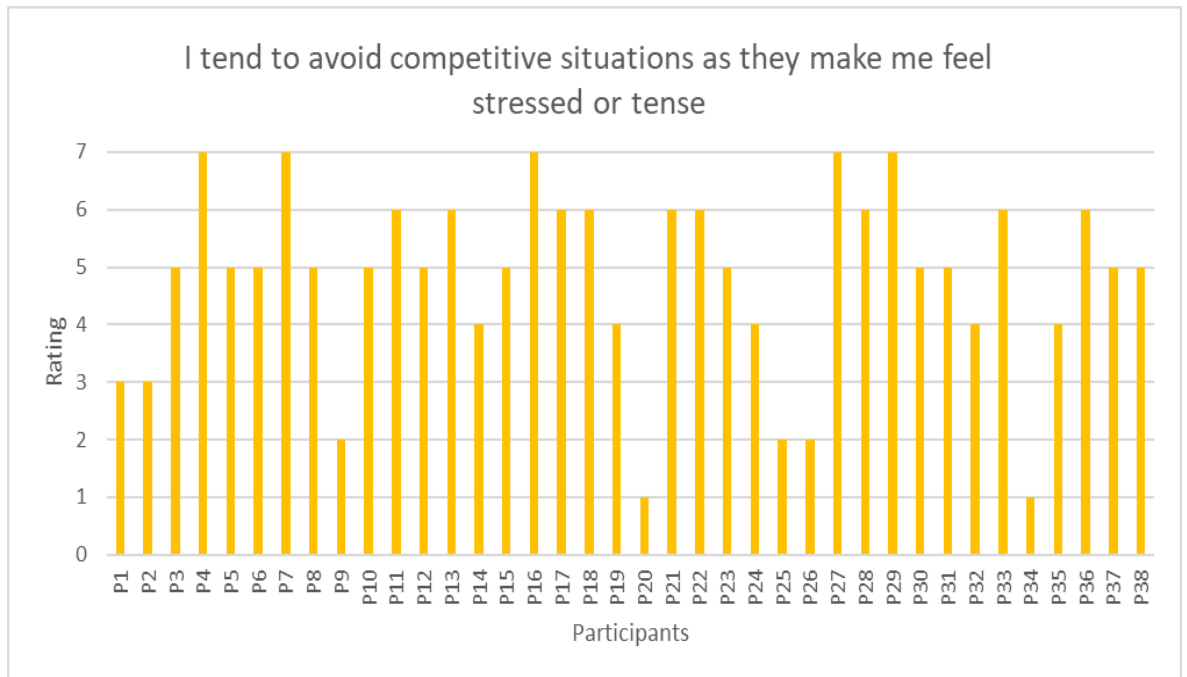


Table 5.2: Statement 8

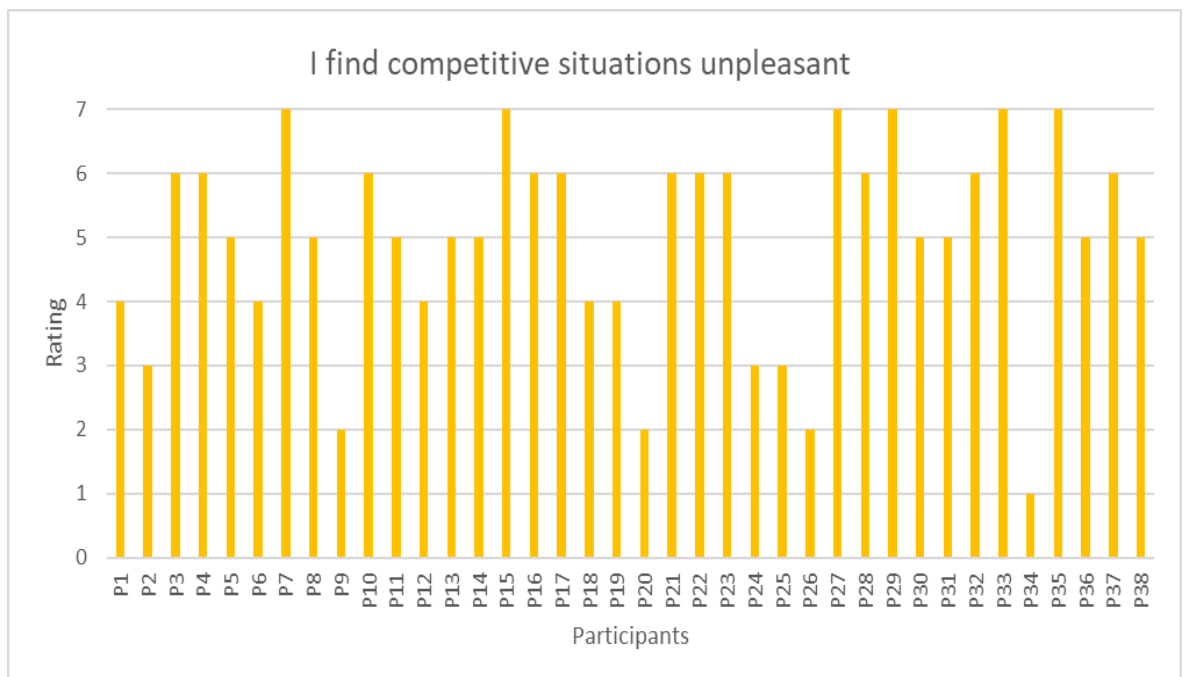
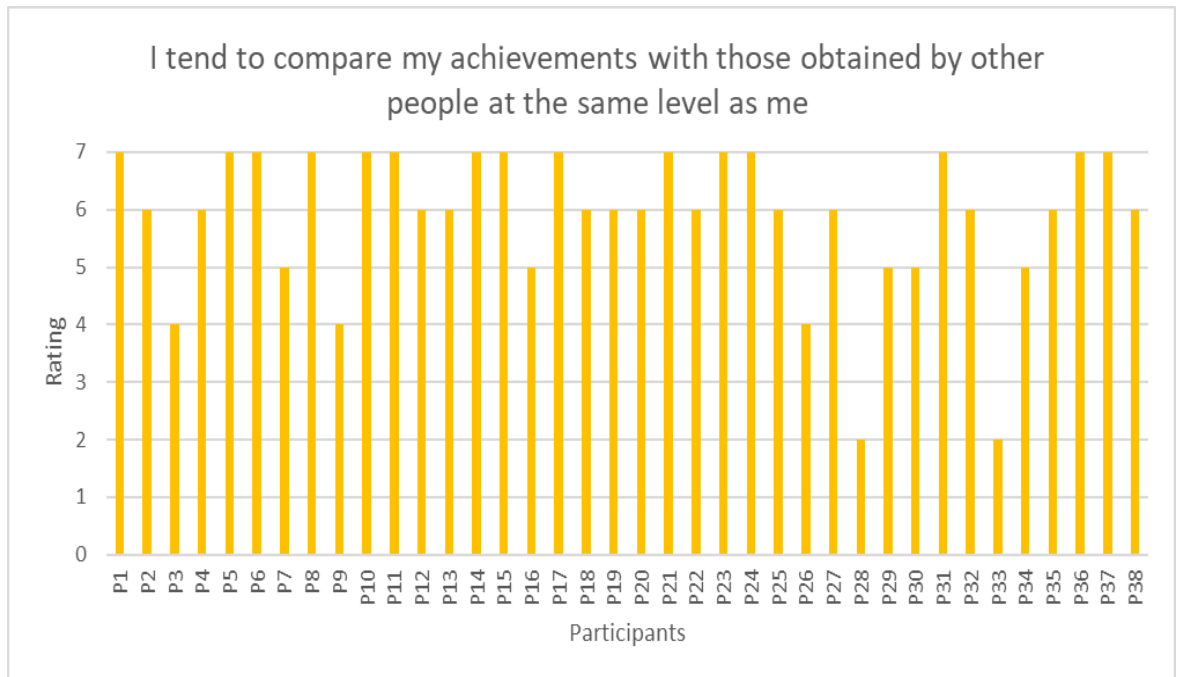


Table 5.2: Statement 9



**Graphic representation of Table 5.3**

Table 5.3: Statement 1

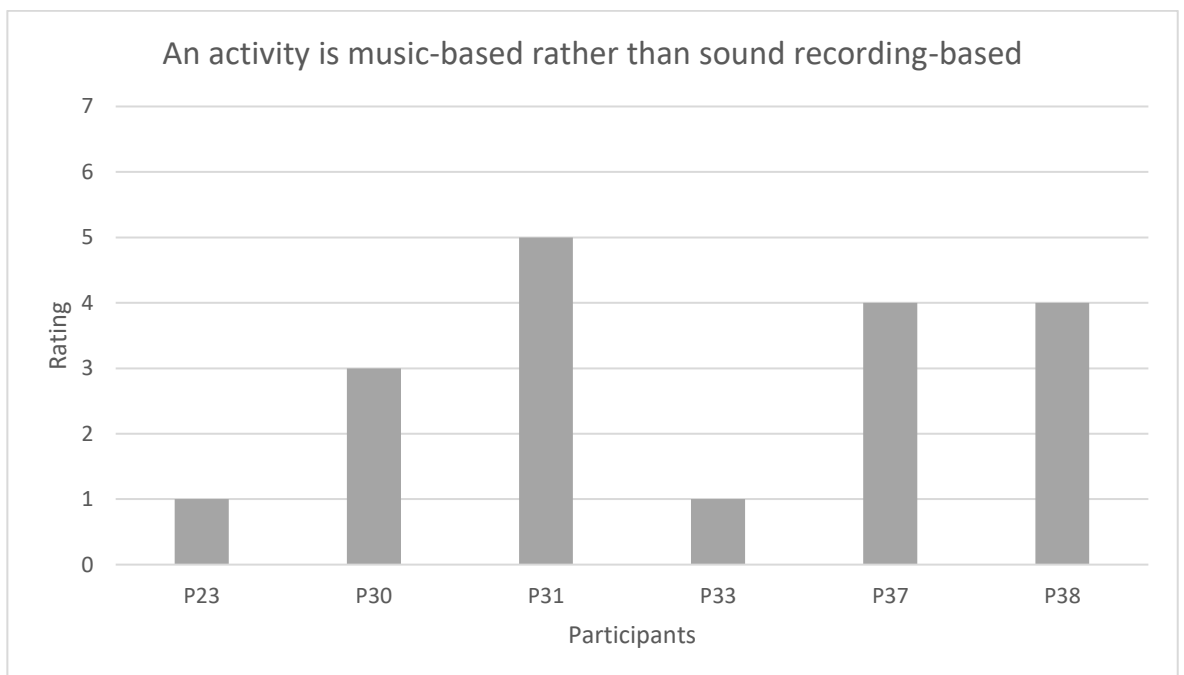


Table 5.3: Statement 2

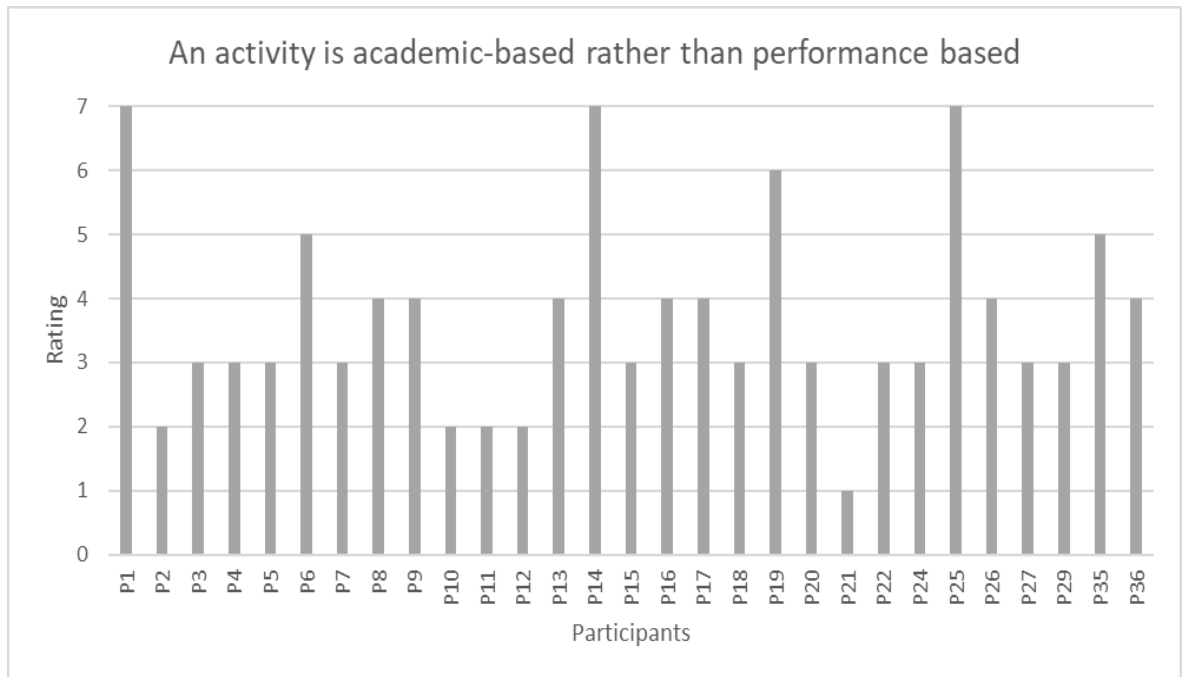


Table 5.3: Statement 3

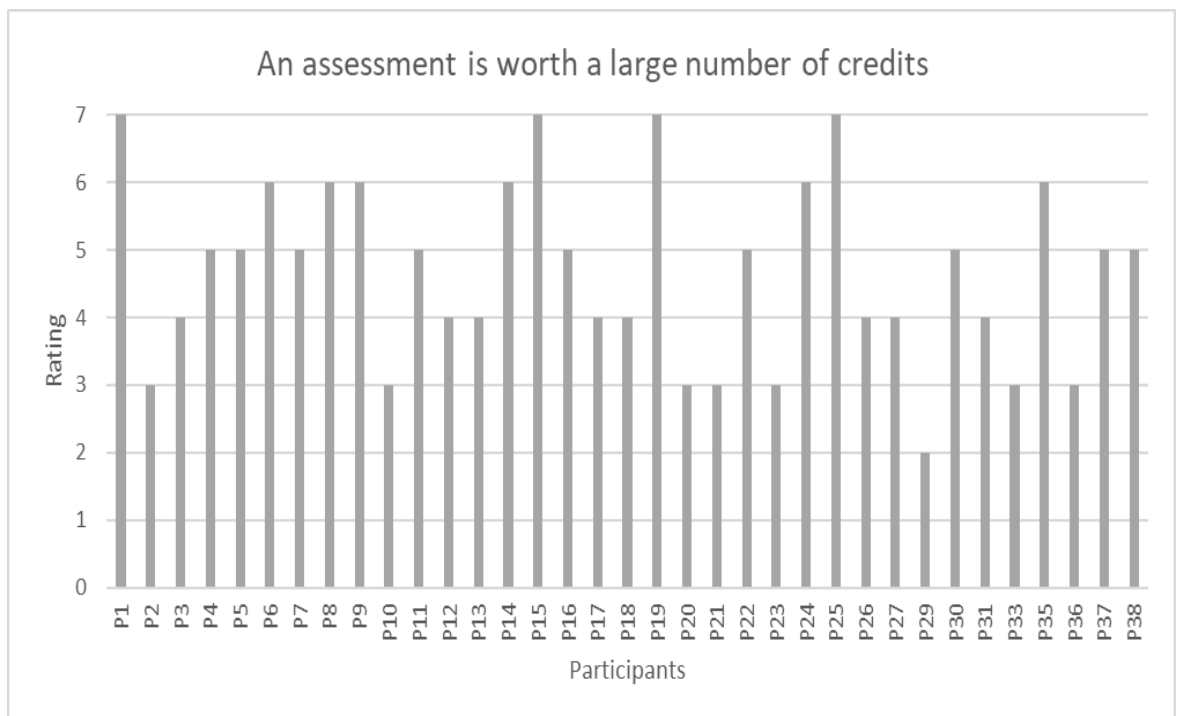


Table 5.3: Statement 4

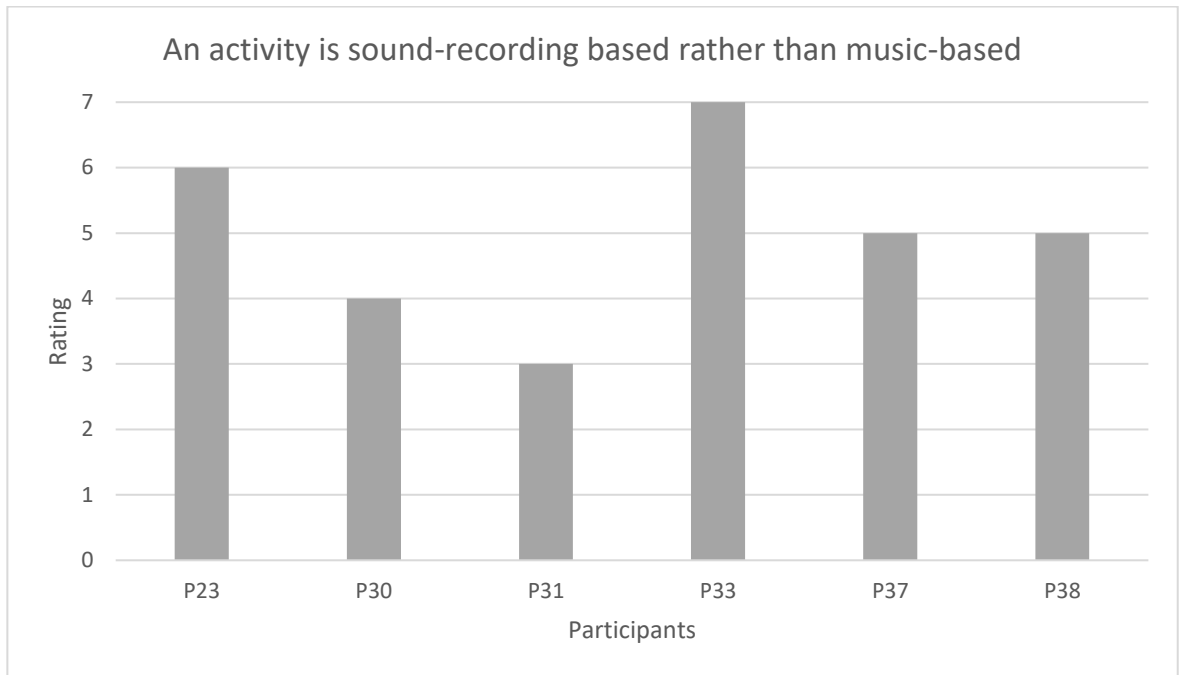


Table 5.3: Statement 5

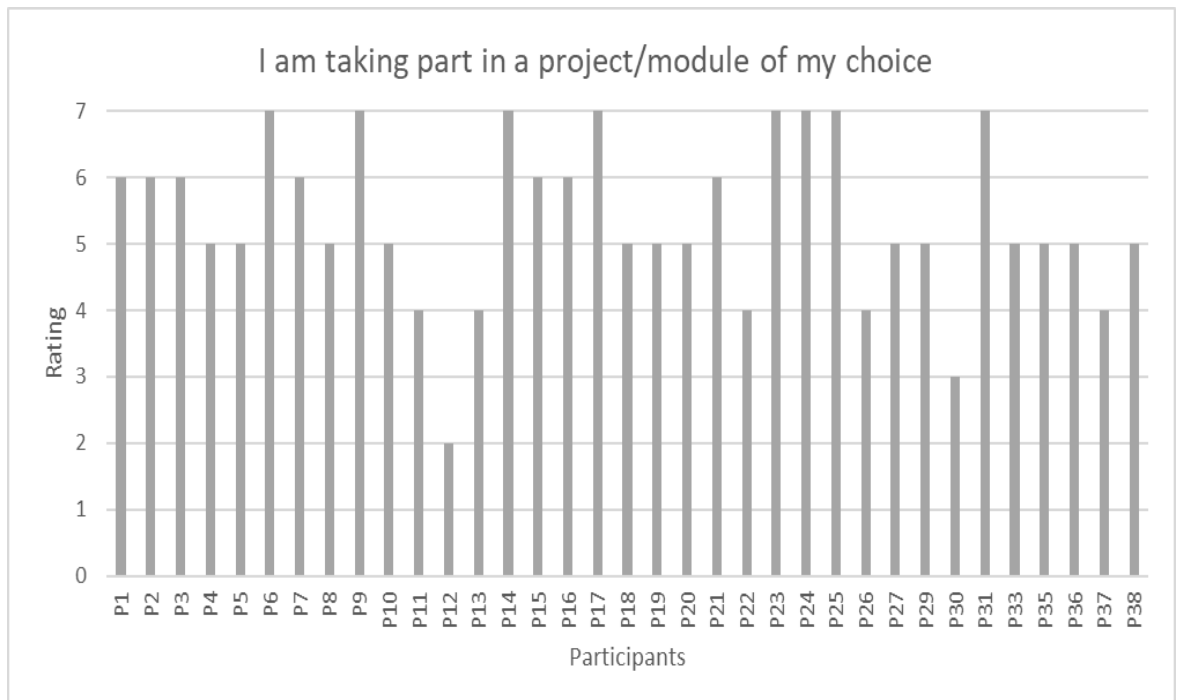


Table 5.3: Statement 6

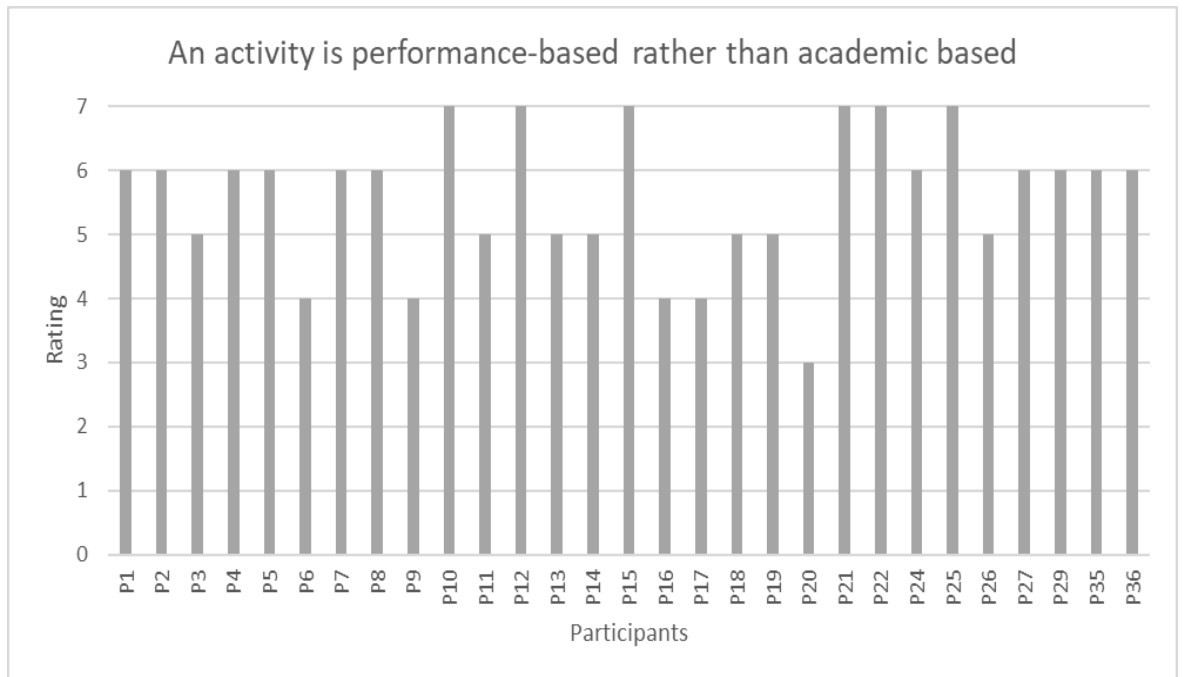


Table 5.3: Statement 7

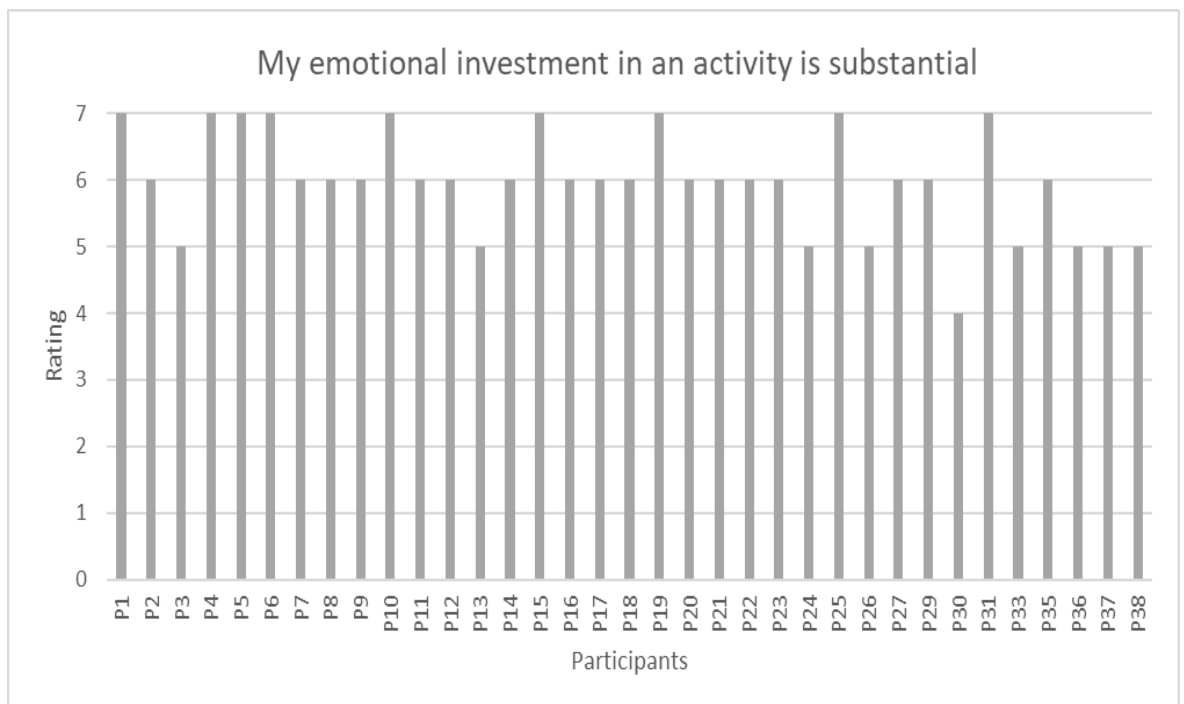
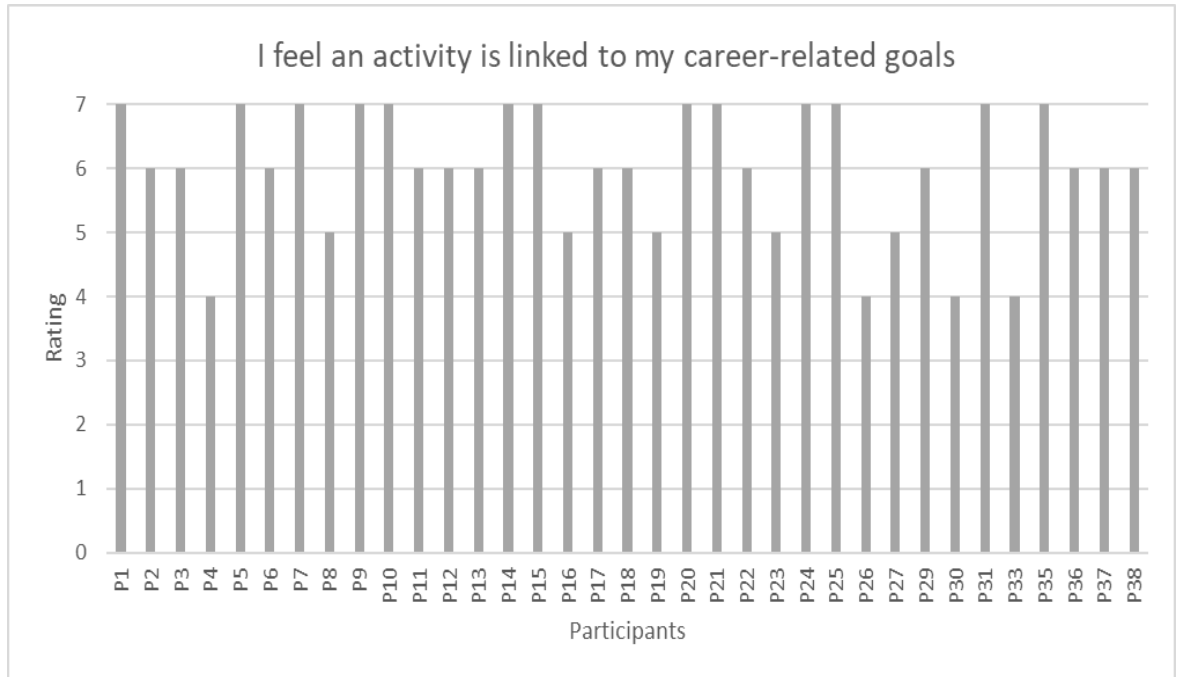


Table 5.3: Statement 8



**Graphic representation of Table 5.4**

Table 5.4: Statement 1

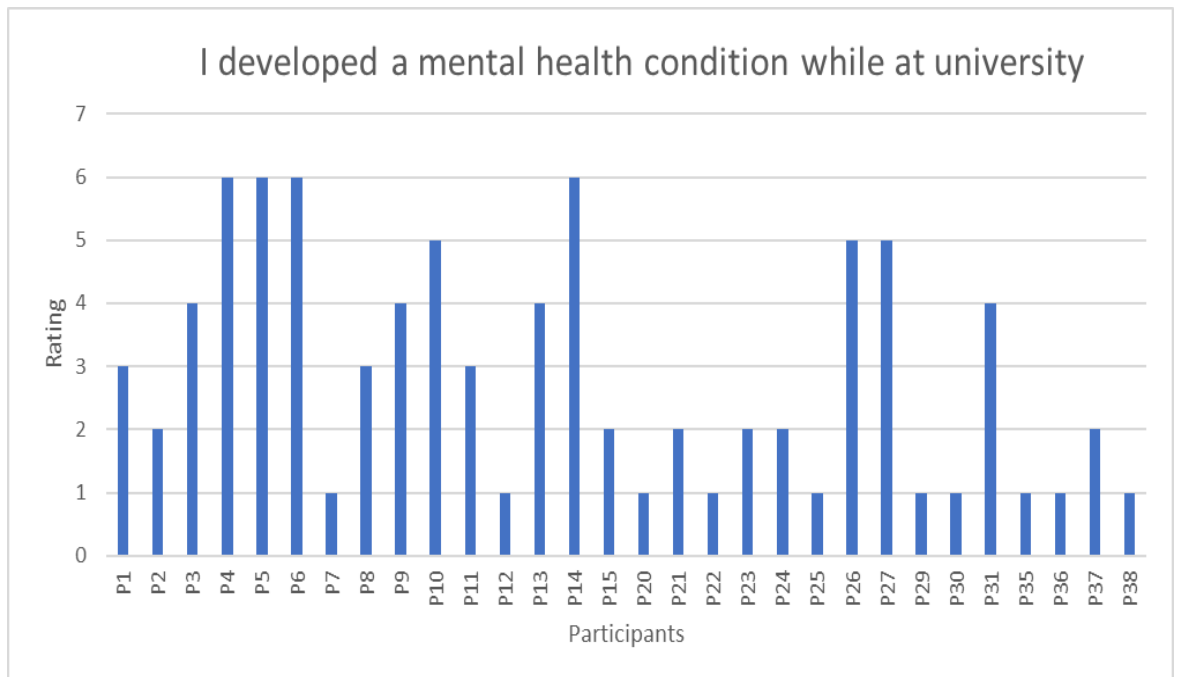




Table 5.4: Statement 2

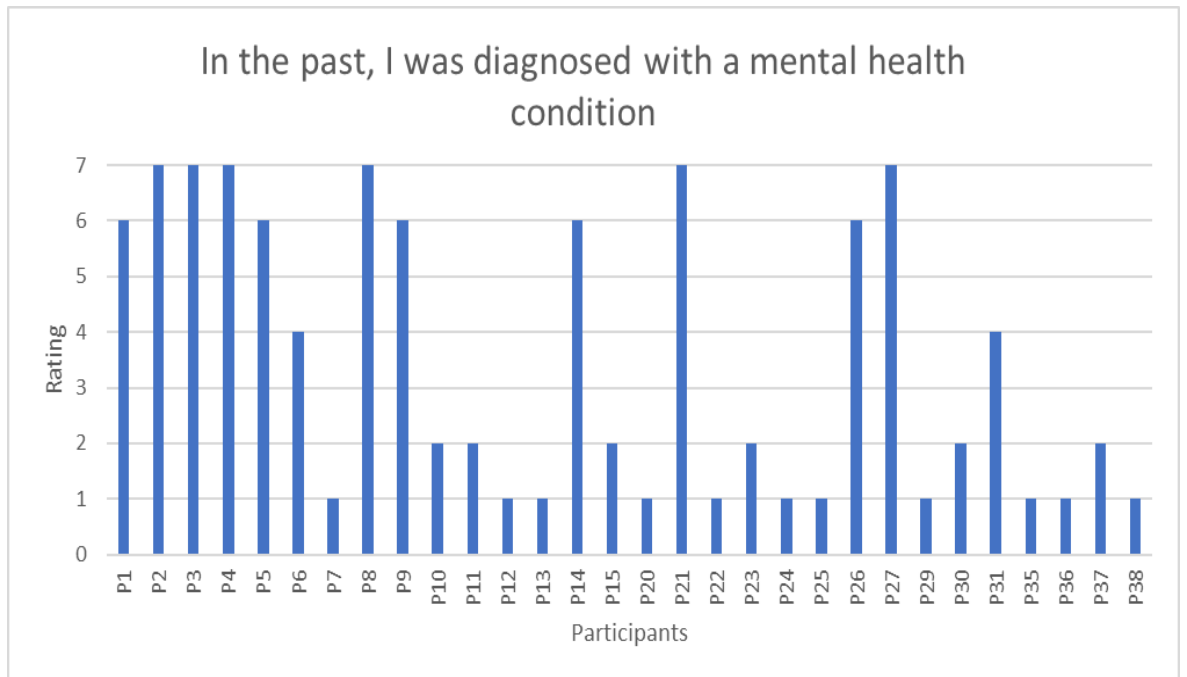


Table 5.4: Statement 3

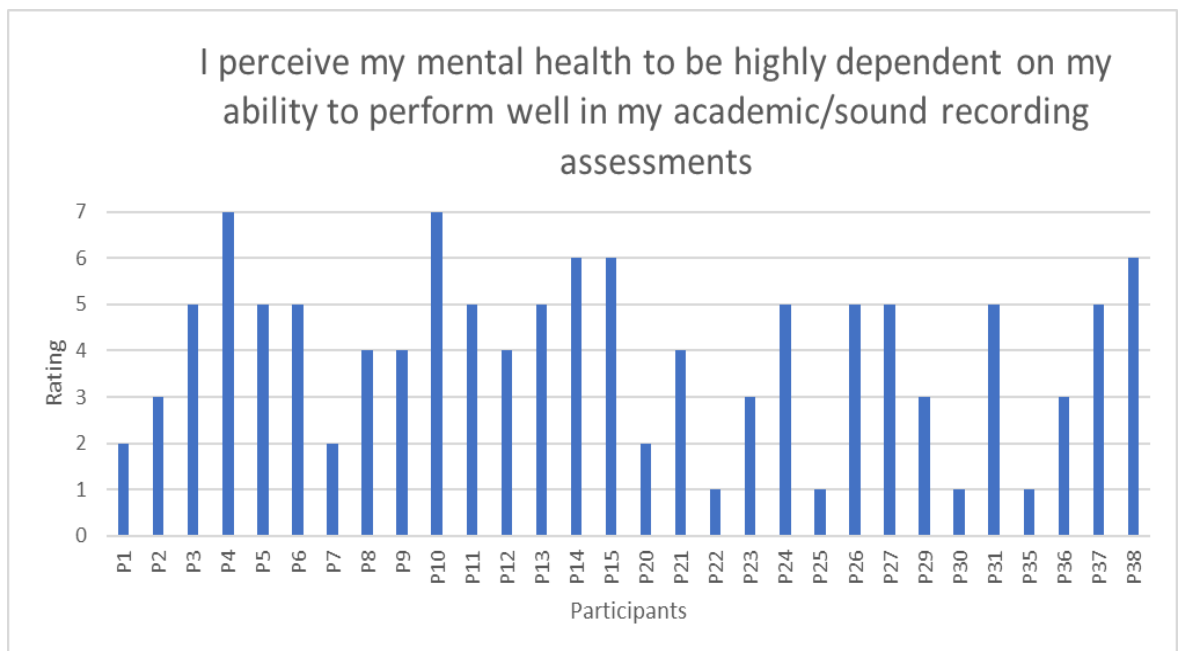


Table 5.4: Statement 4

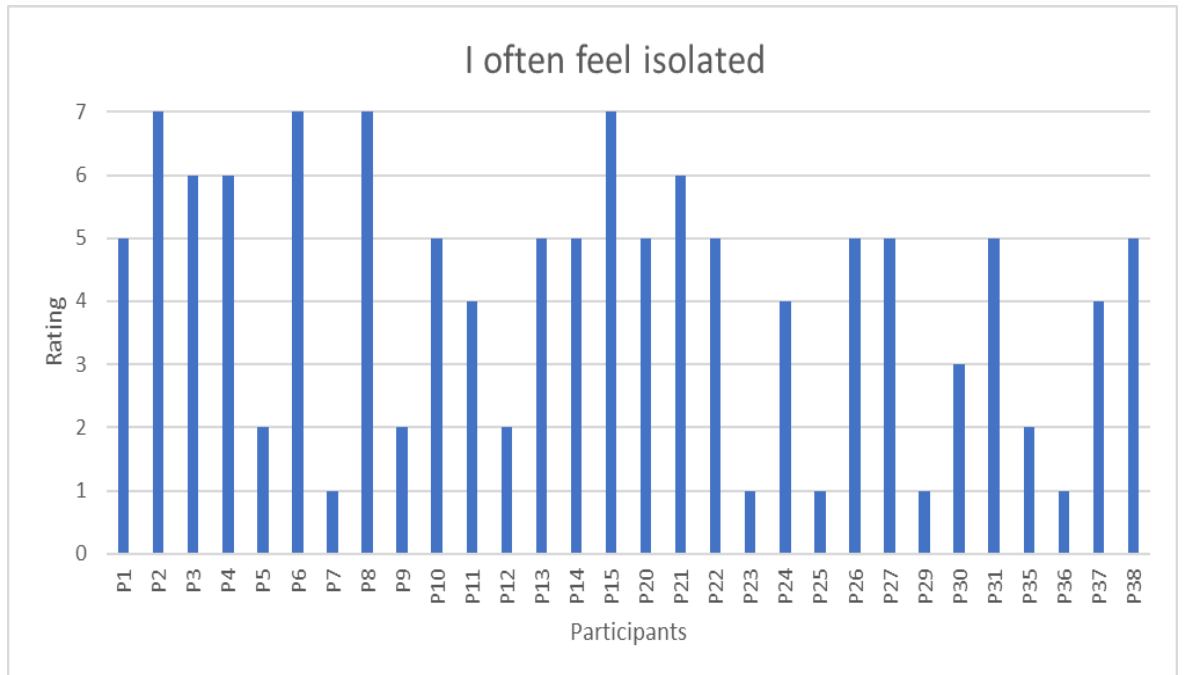


Table 5.4: Statement 5

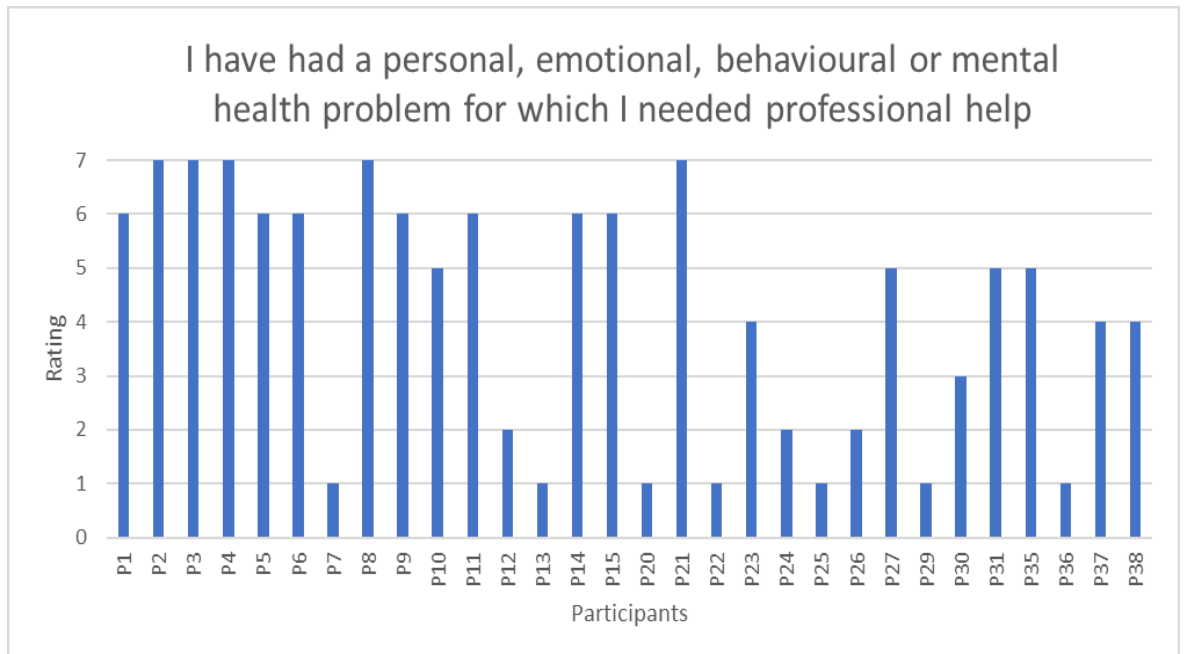


Table 5.4: Statement 6

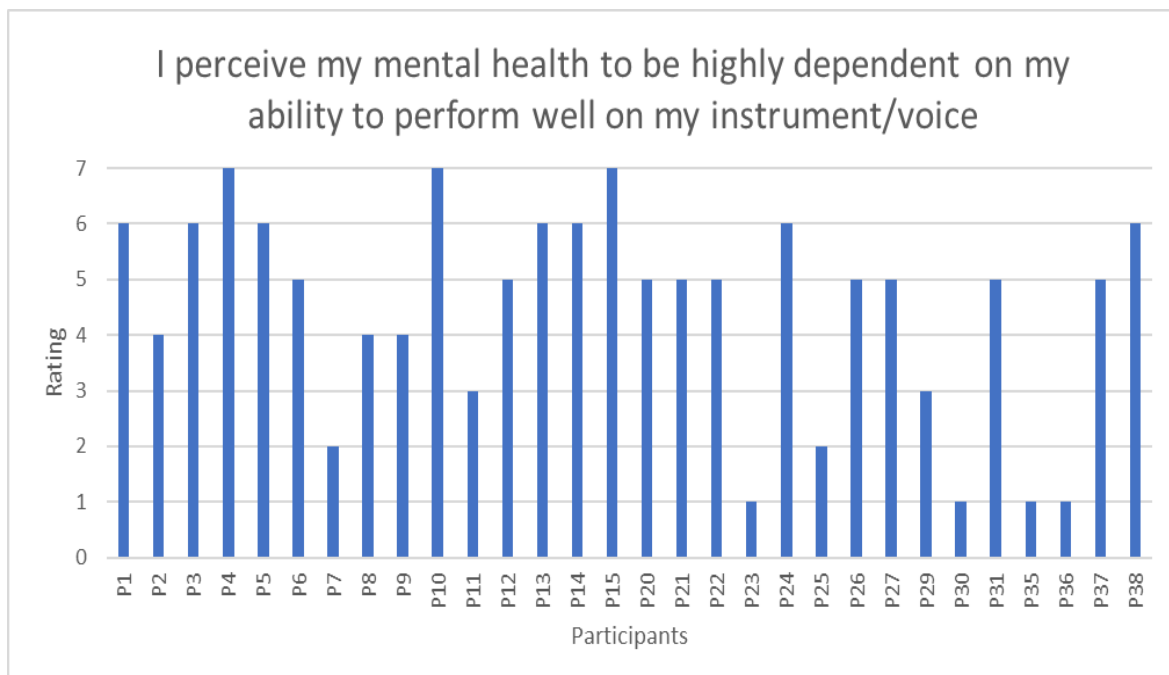
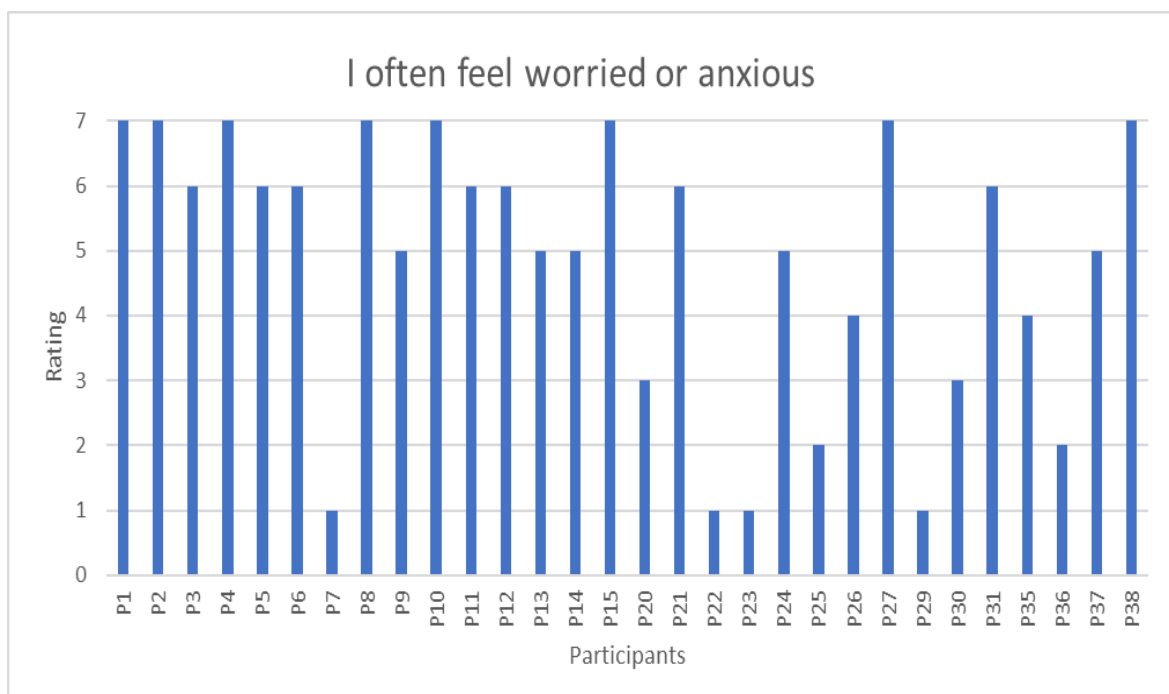


Table 5.4: Statement 7



## Appendix H. Graphs: Likert scales PhD students

### Graphic representation of Table 6.1

Table 6.1: Statement 1

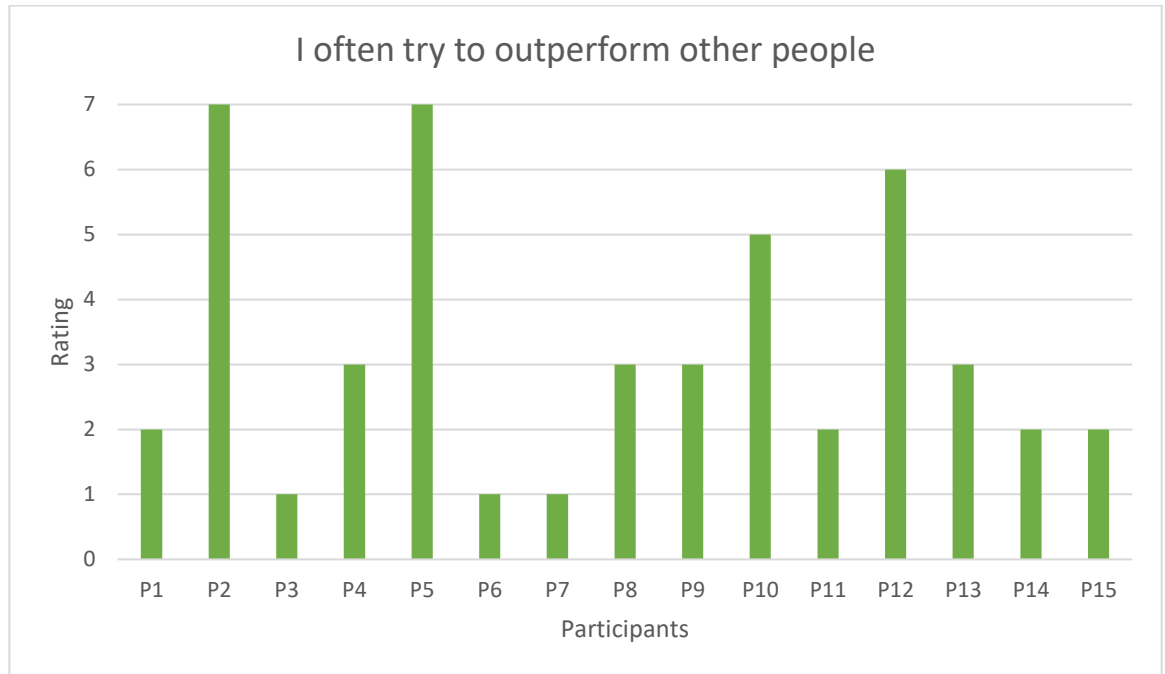


Table 6.1: Statement 2

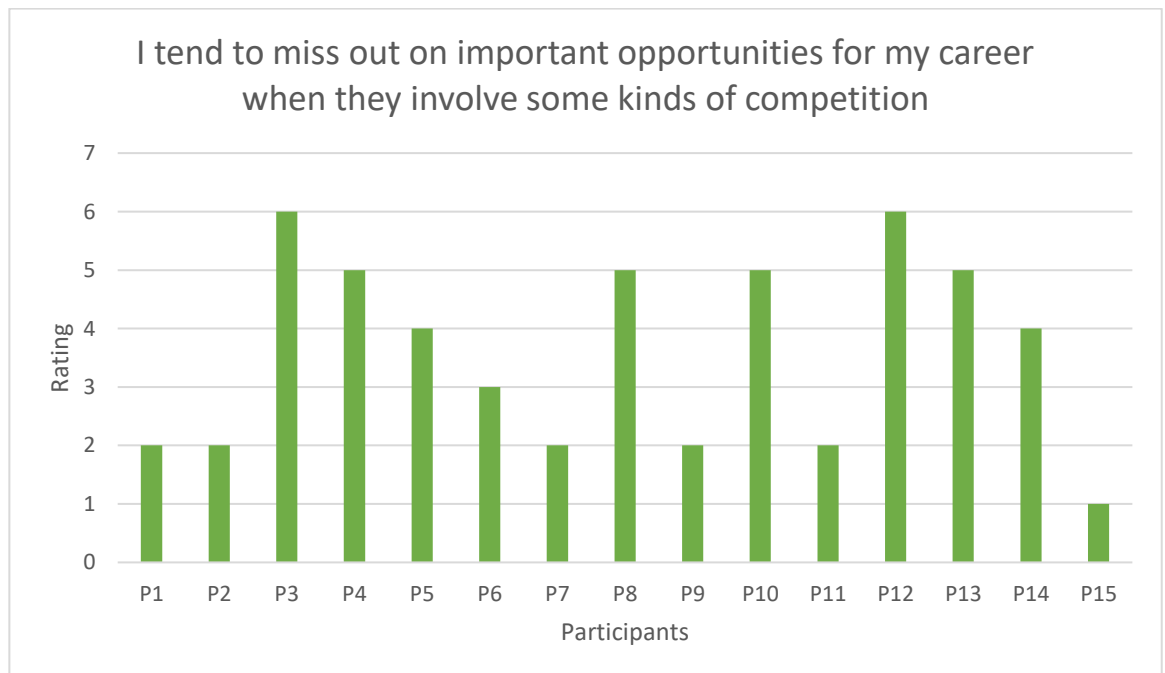


Table 6.1: Statement 3

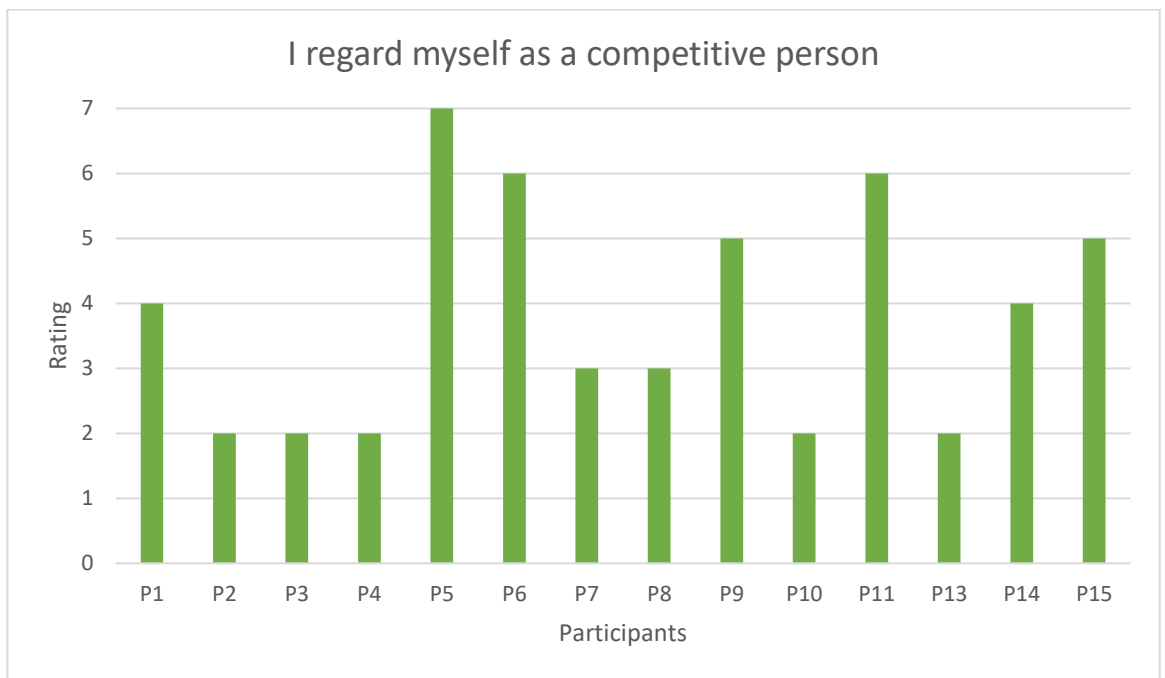


Table 6.1: Statement 4

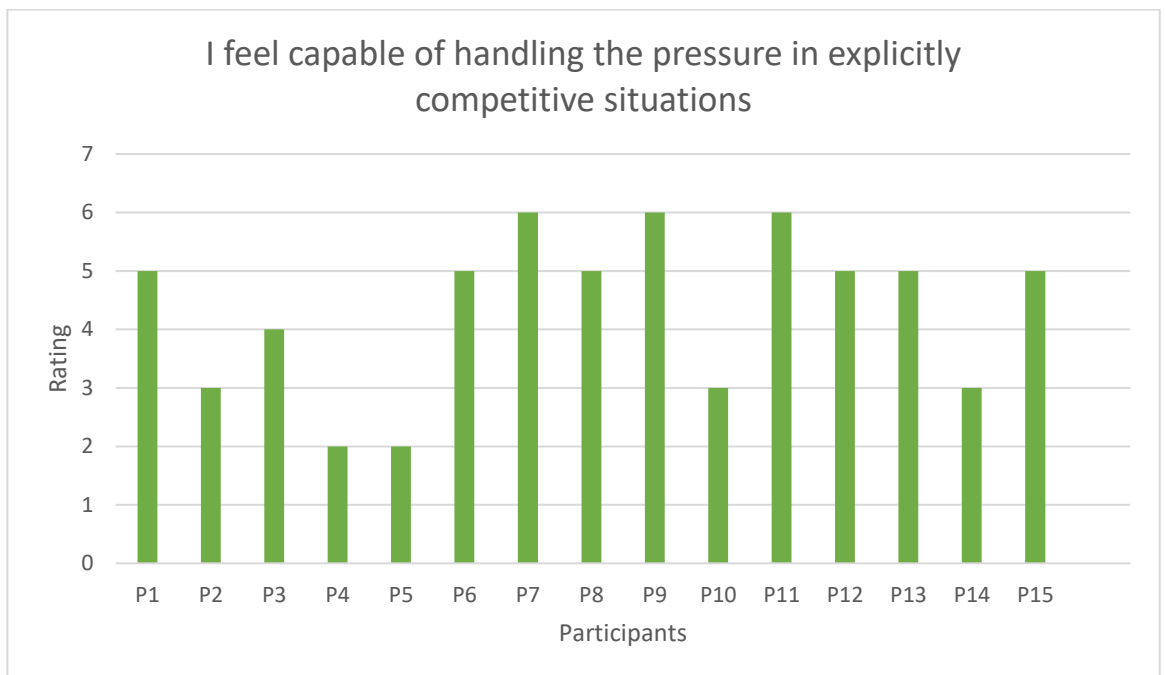


Table 6.1: Statement 5

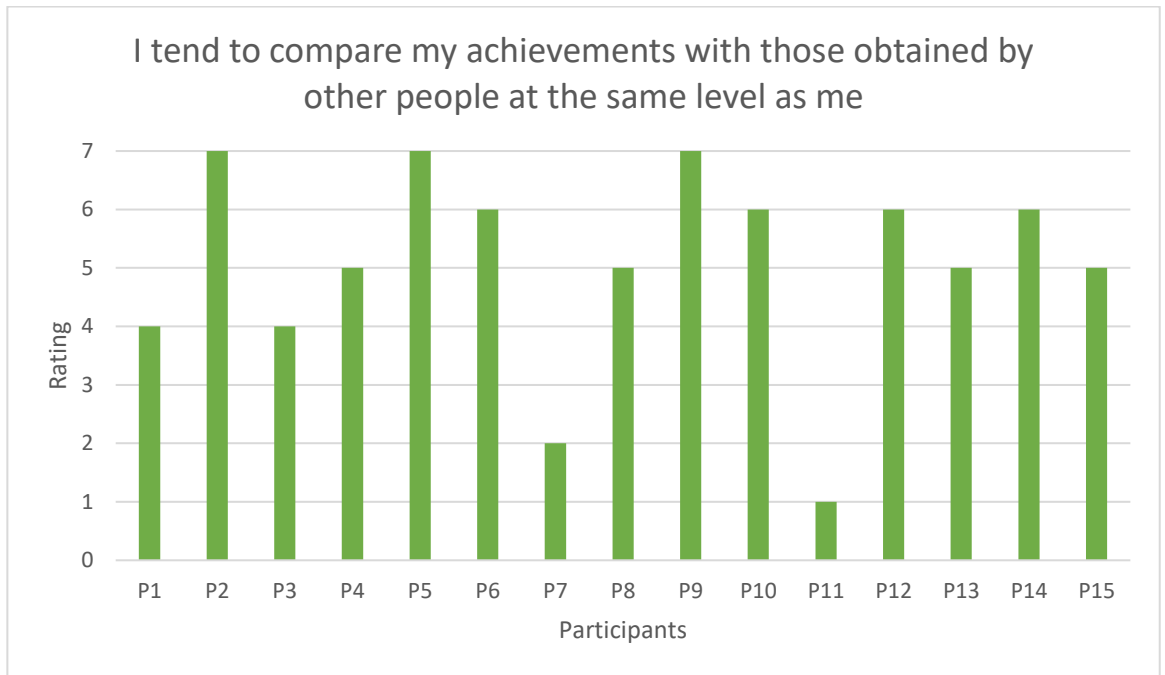


Table 6.1: Statement 6

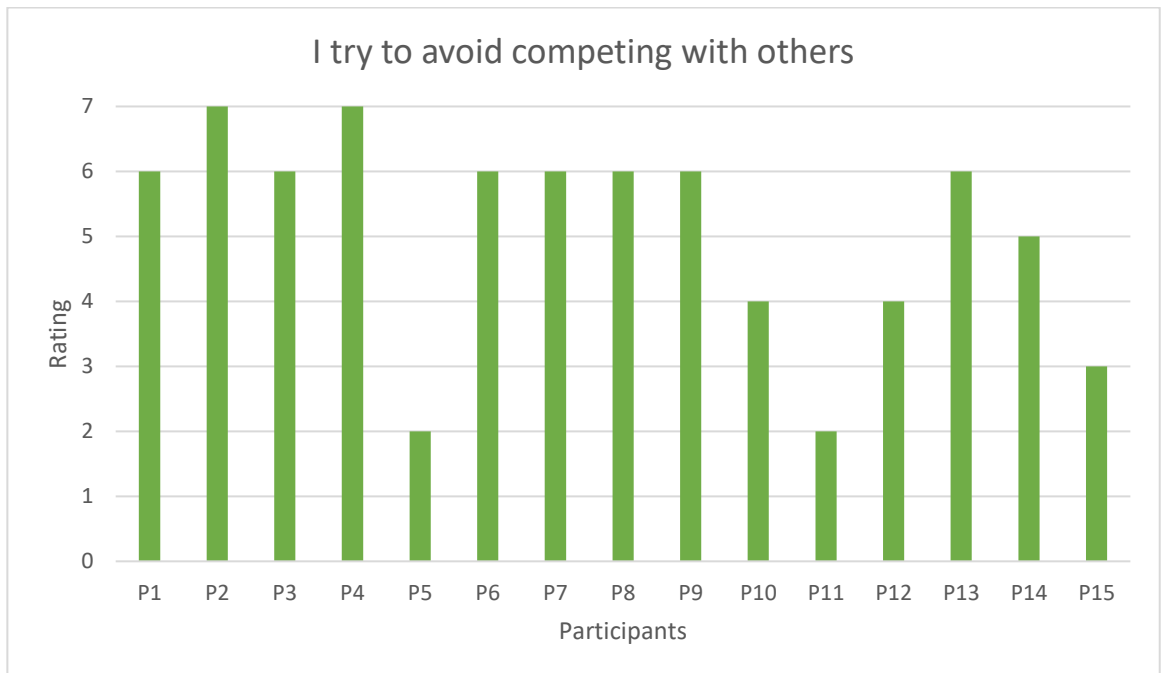


Table 6.1: Statement 7

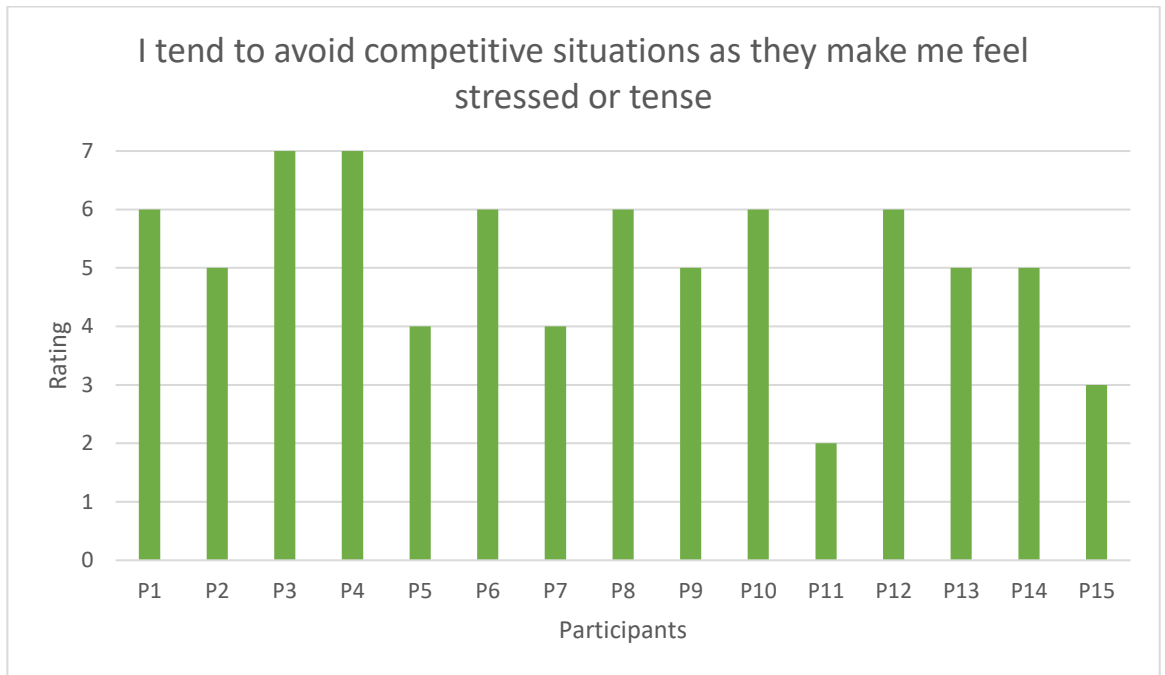


Table 6.1: Statement 8

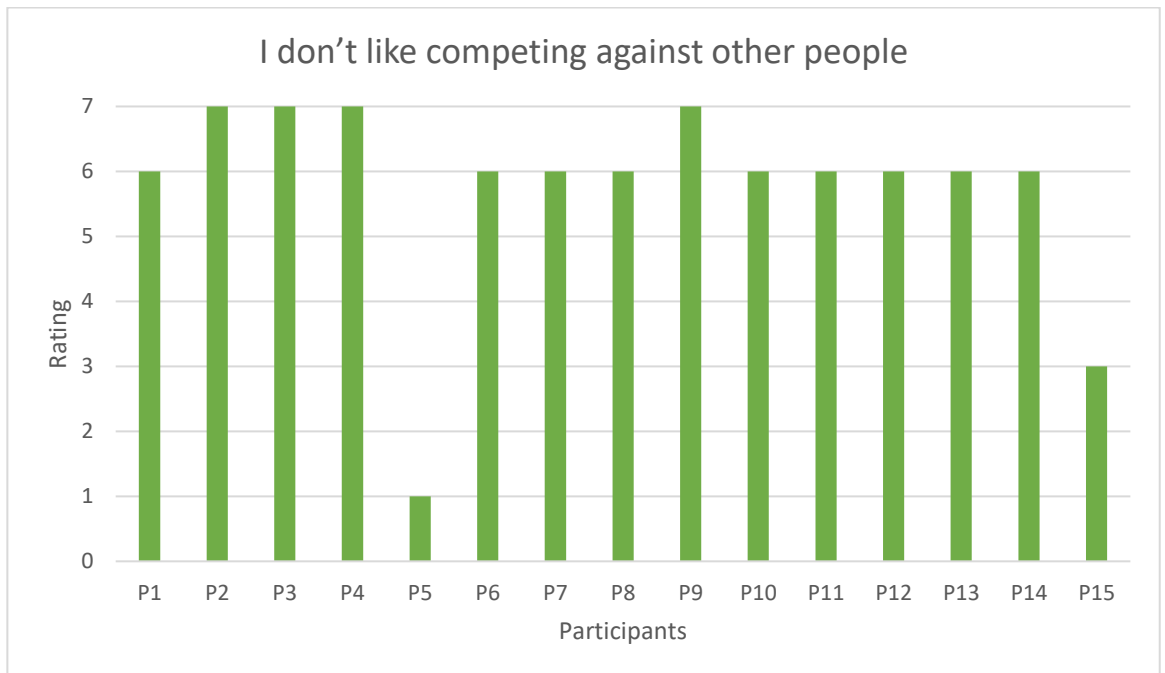
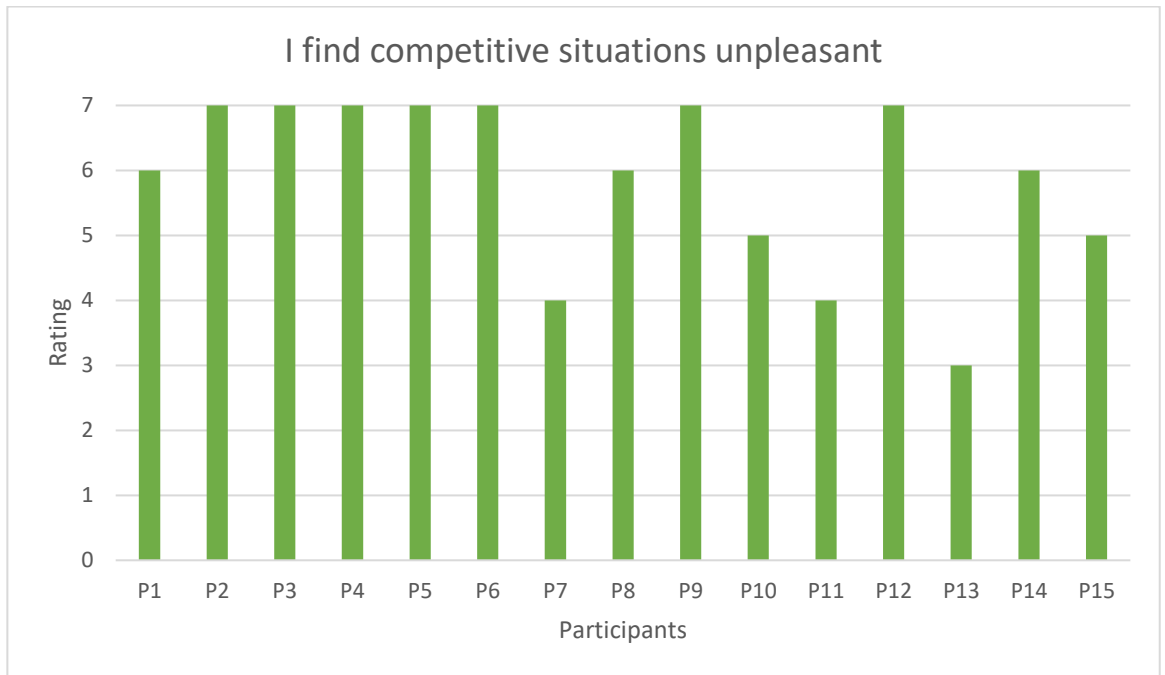


Table 6.1: Statement 9



---

**Graphic representation of Table 6.2**

Table 6.2: Statement 1

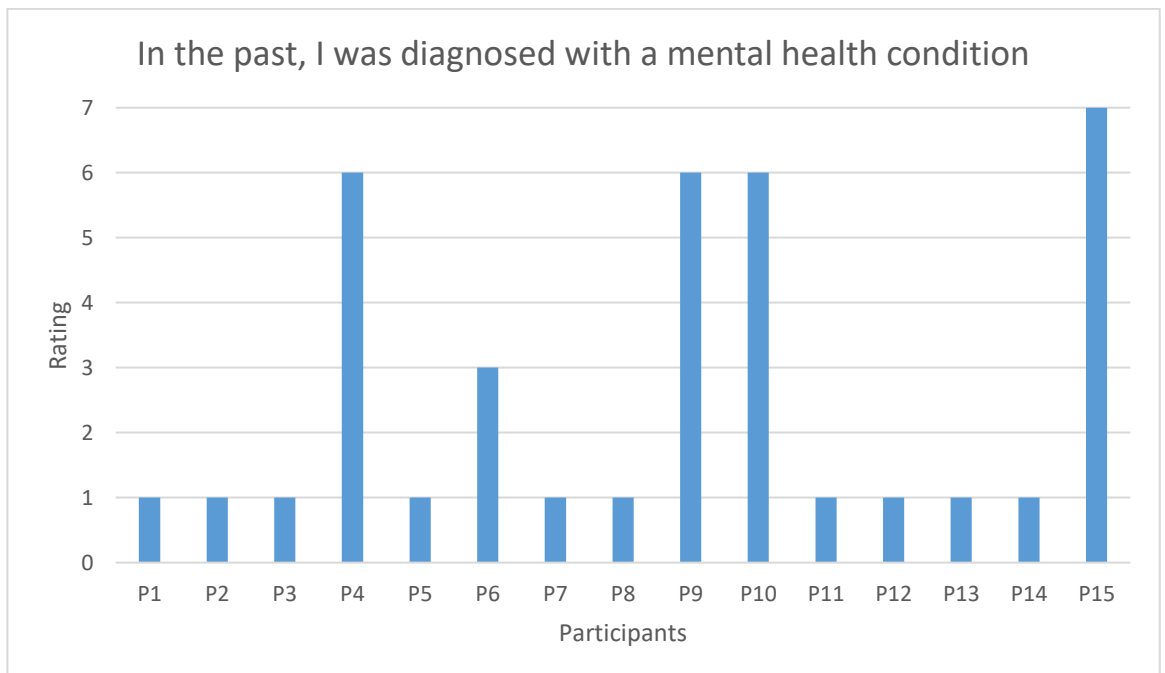




Table 6.2: Statement 2

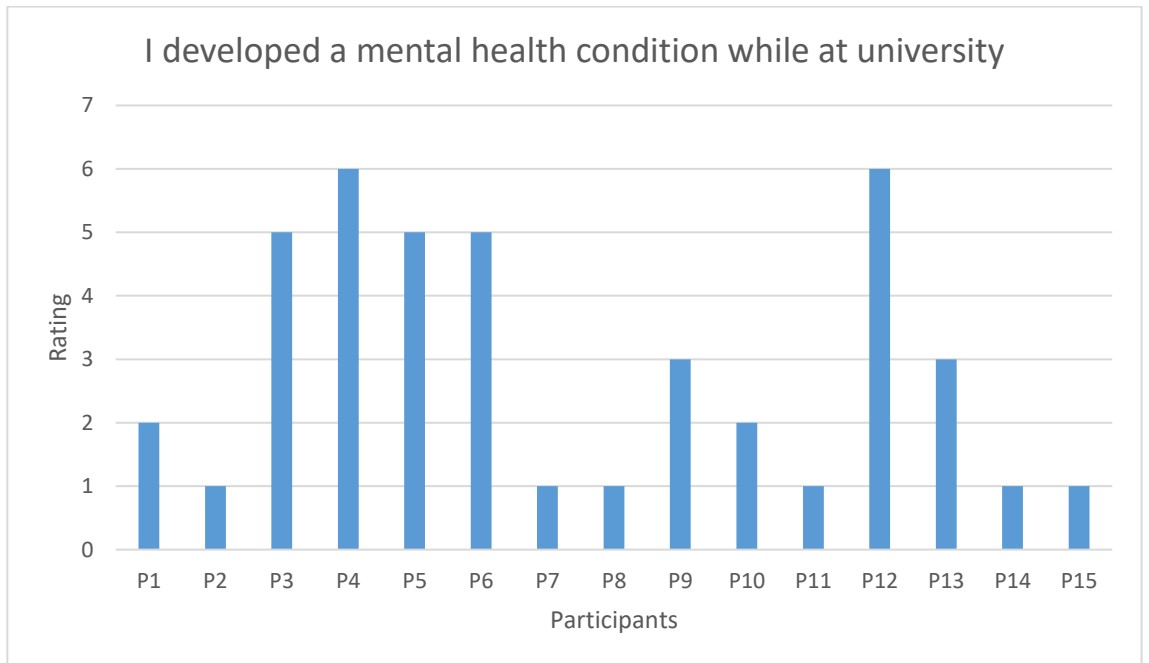


Table 6.2: Statement 3

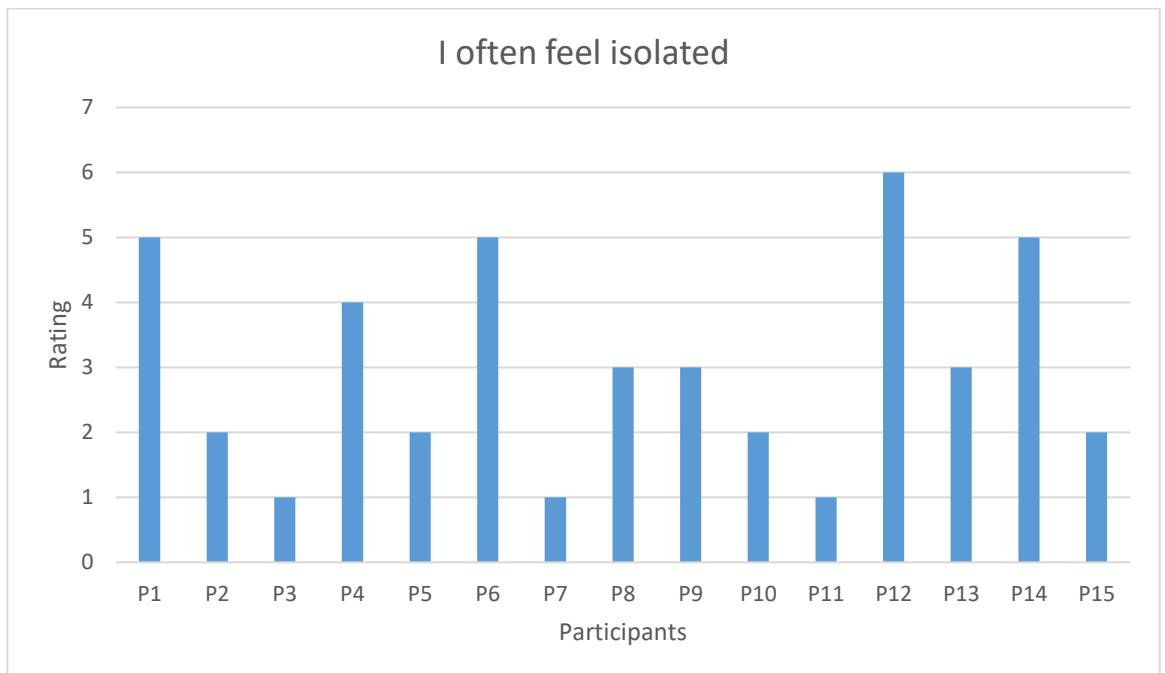


Table 6.2: Statement 4

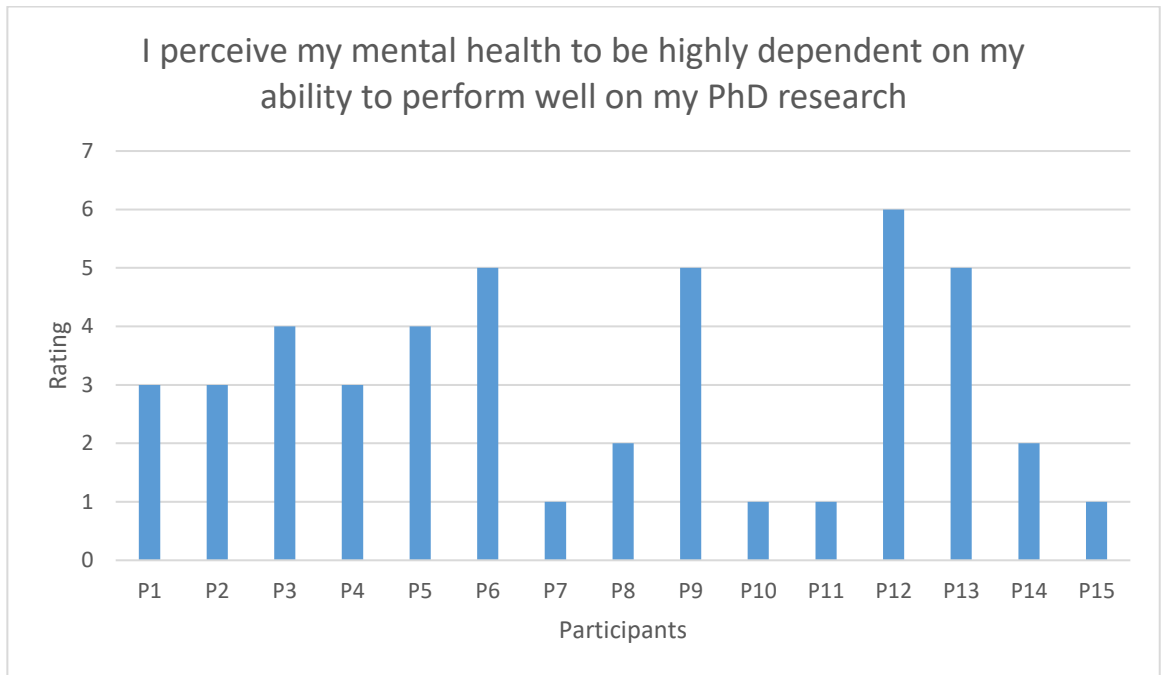


Table 6.2: Statement 5

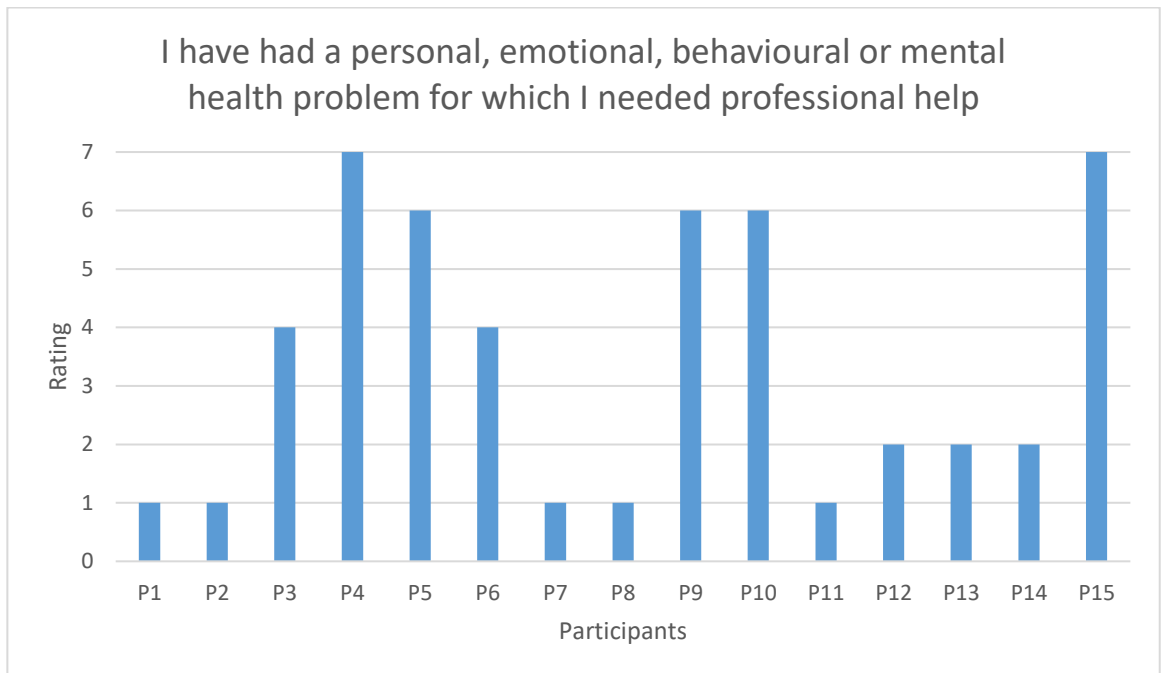
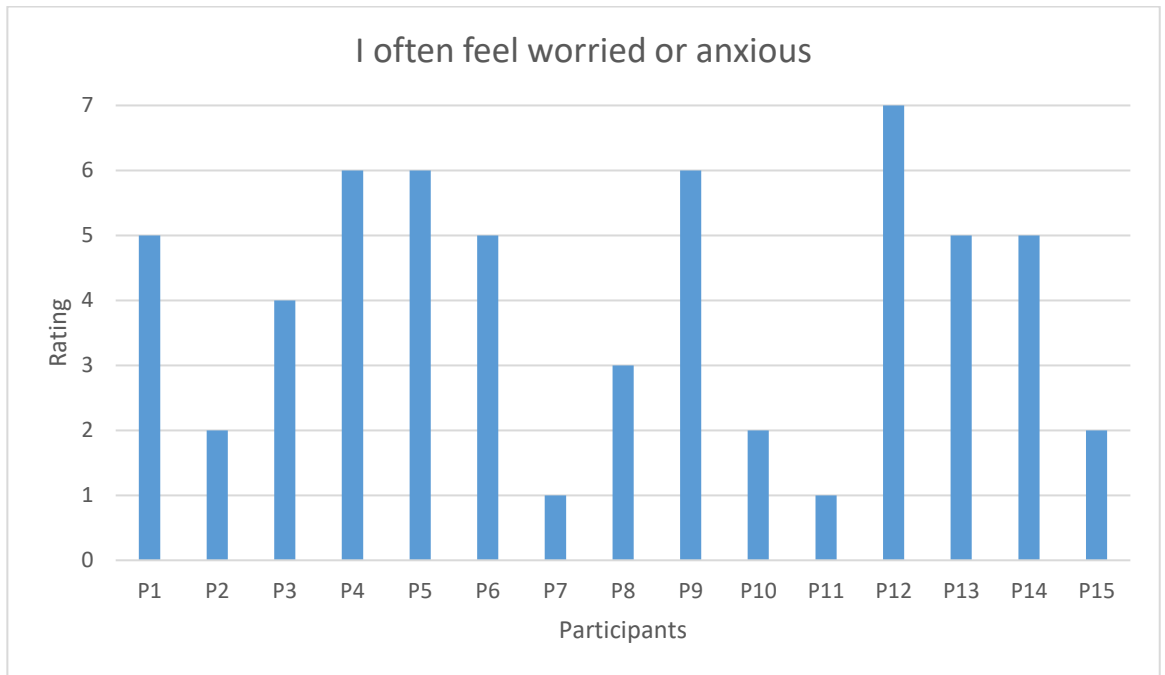


Table 6.2: Statement 6



## Appendix I. Graphs: Likert scales MA students

### Graphic representation of Table 7.1

Table 7.1: Statement 1



Table 7.1: Statement 2

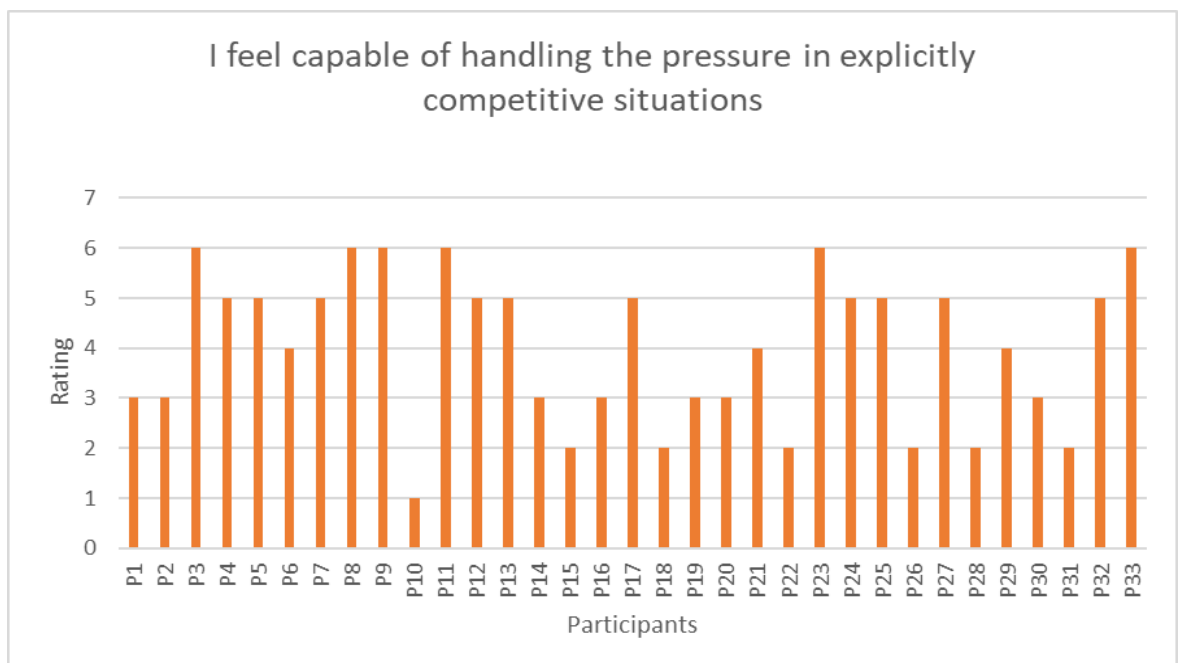


Table 7.1: Statement 3

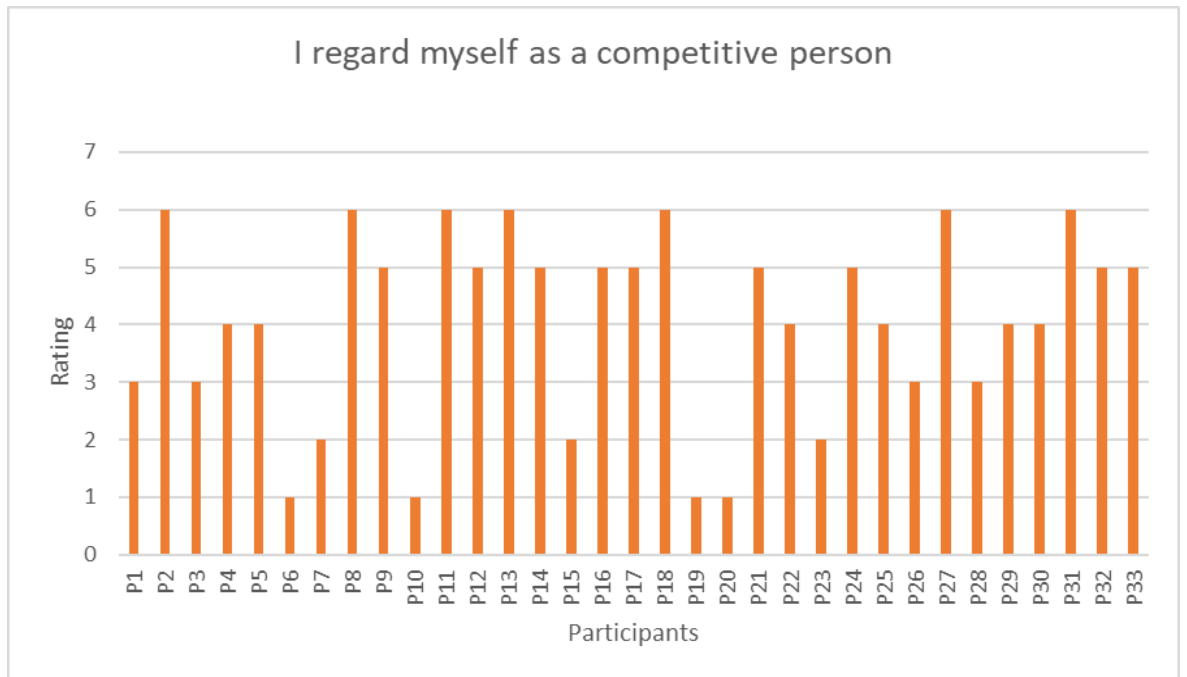


Table 7.1: Statement 4

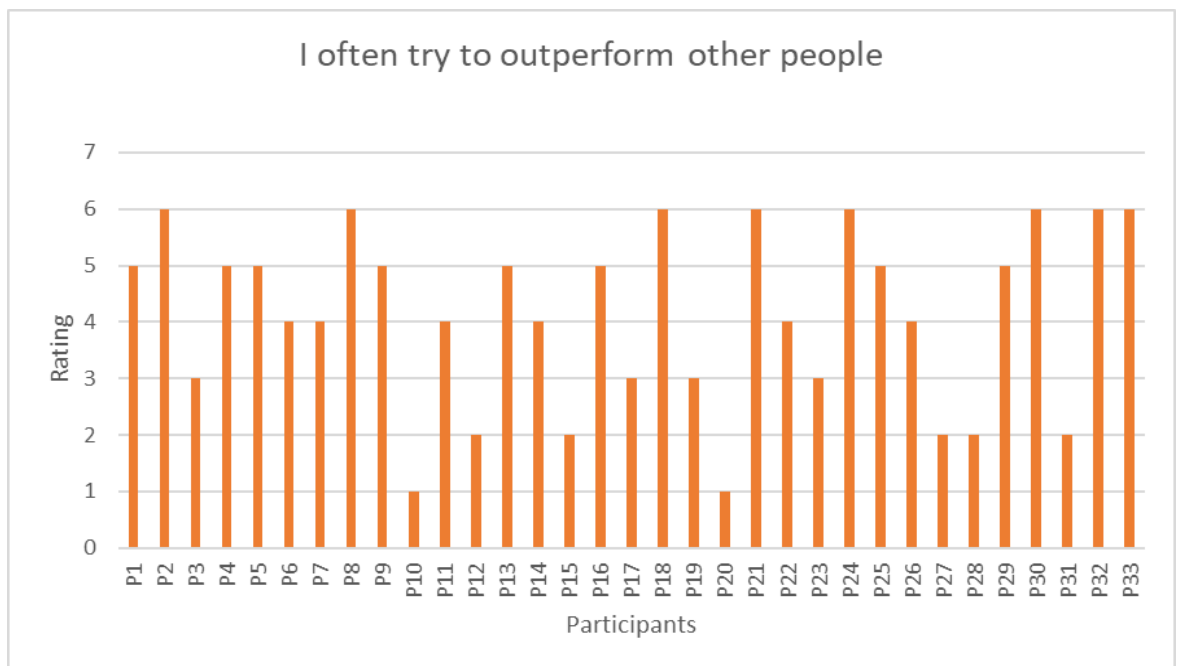


Table 7.1: Statement 5



Table 7.1: Statement 6

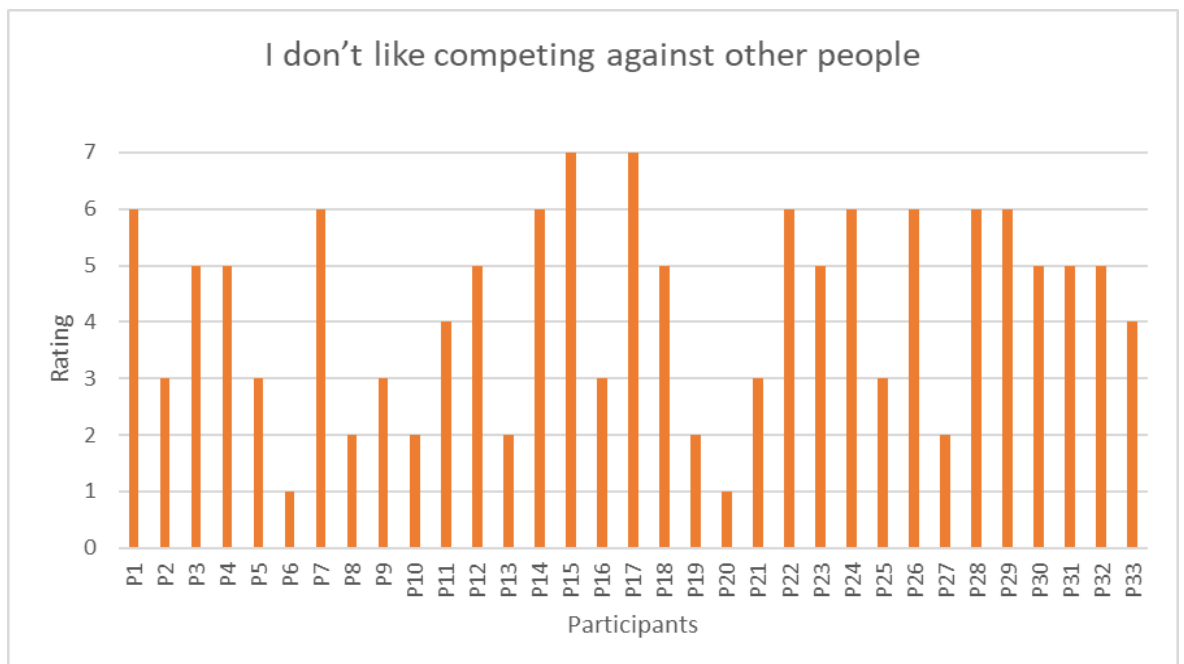


Table 7.1: Statement 7

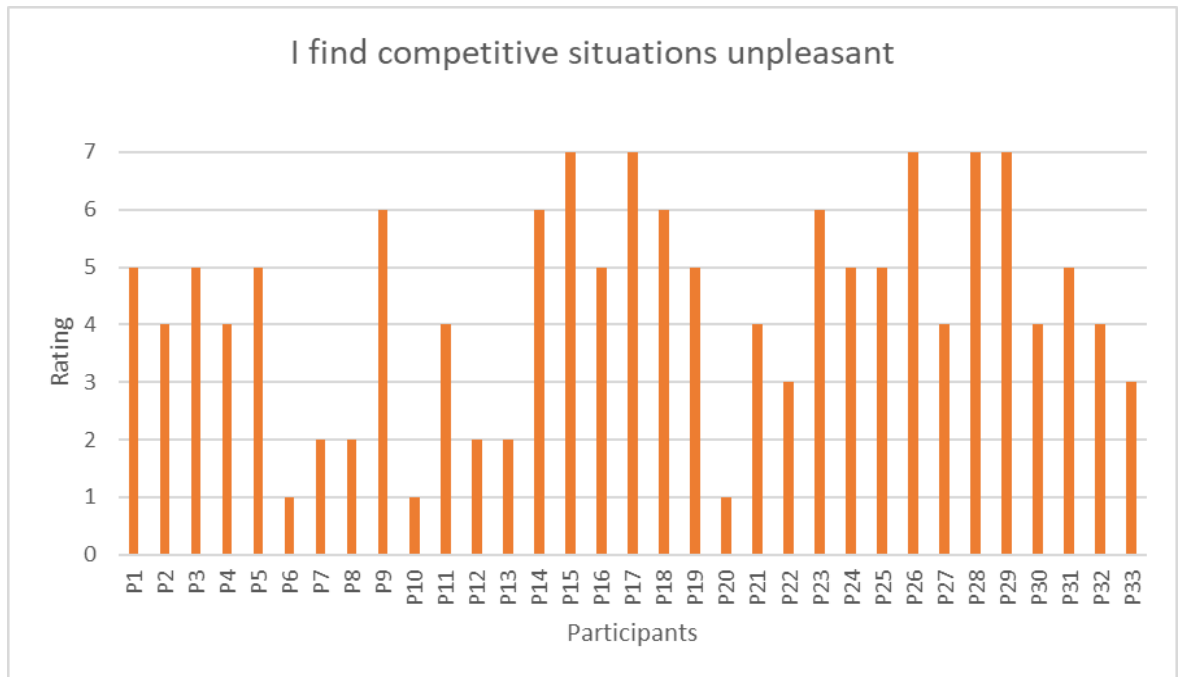


Table 7.1: Statement 8

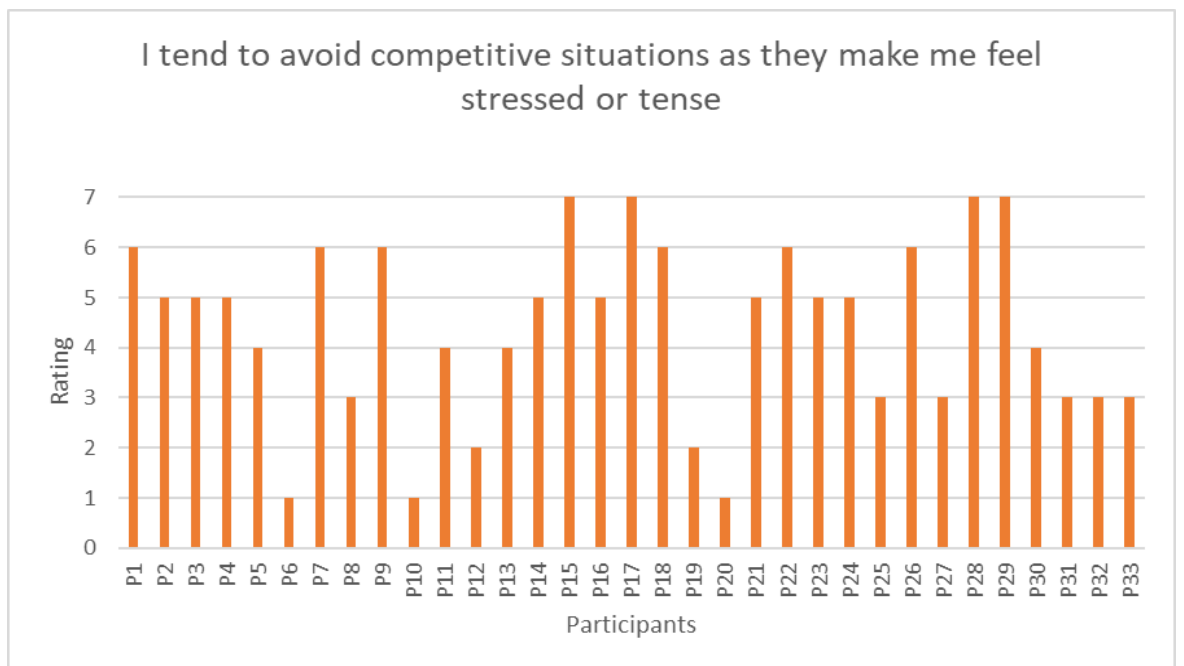
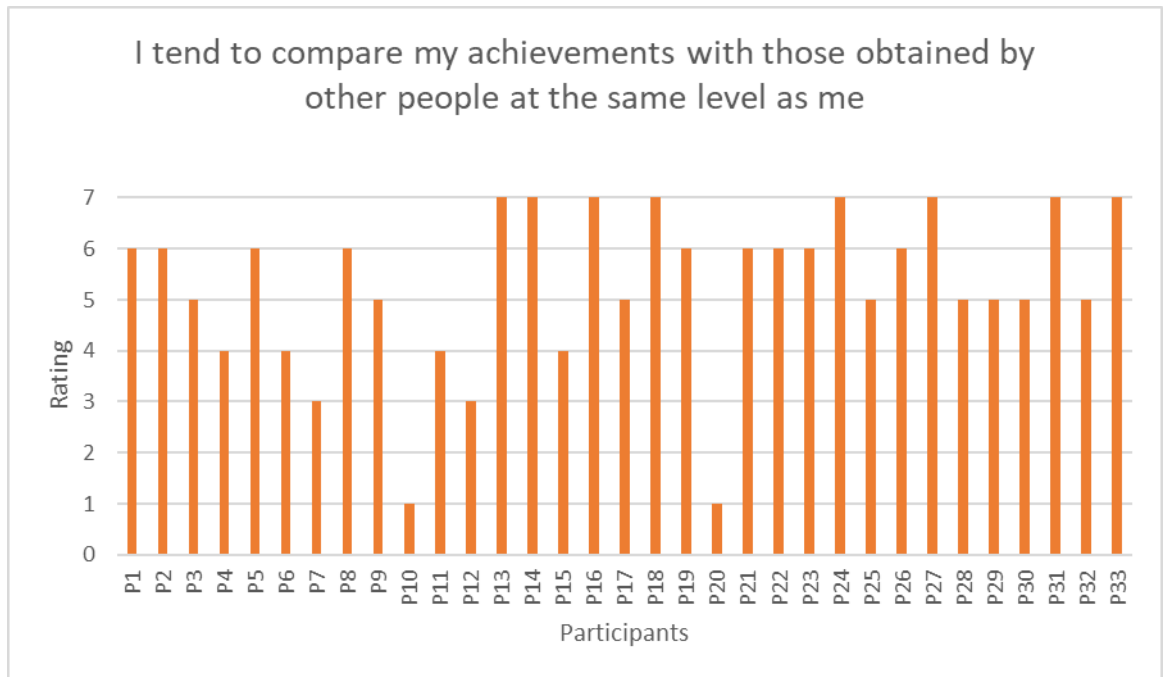


Table 7.1: Statement 9



**Graphic representation of Table 7.2**

Table 7.2: Statement 1

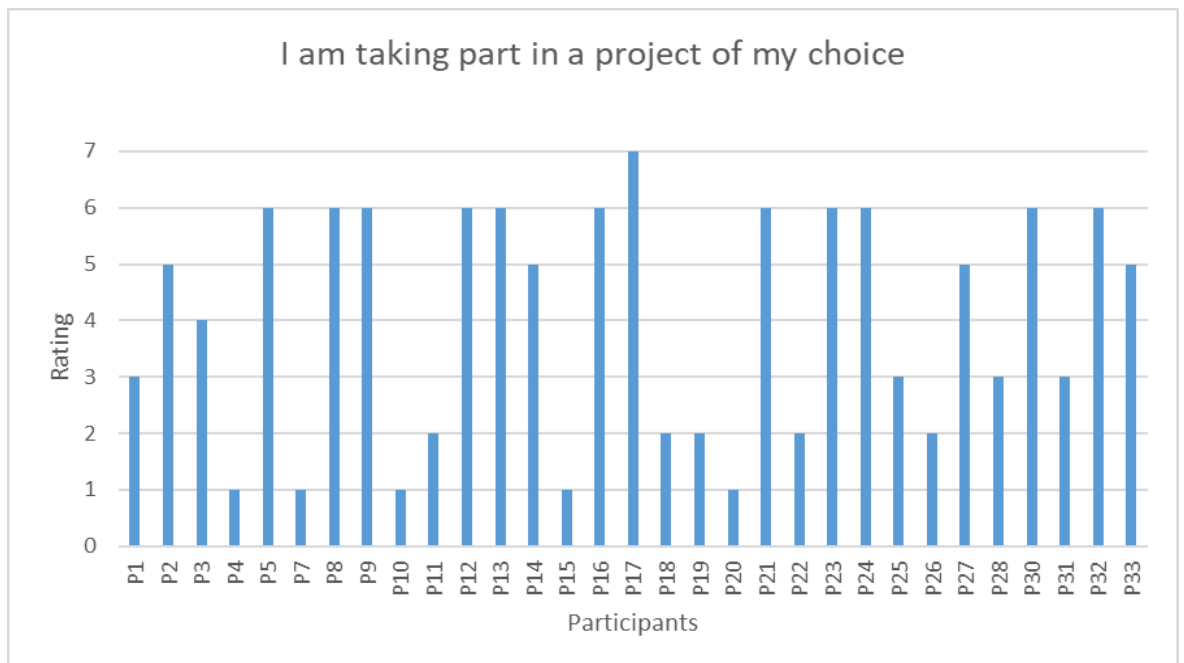




Table 7.2: Statement 2

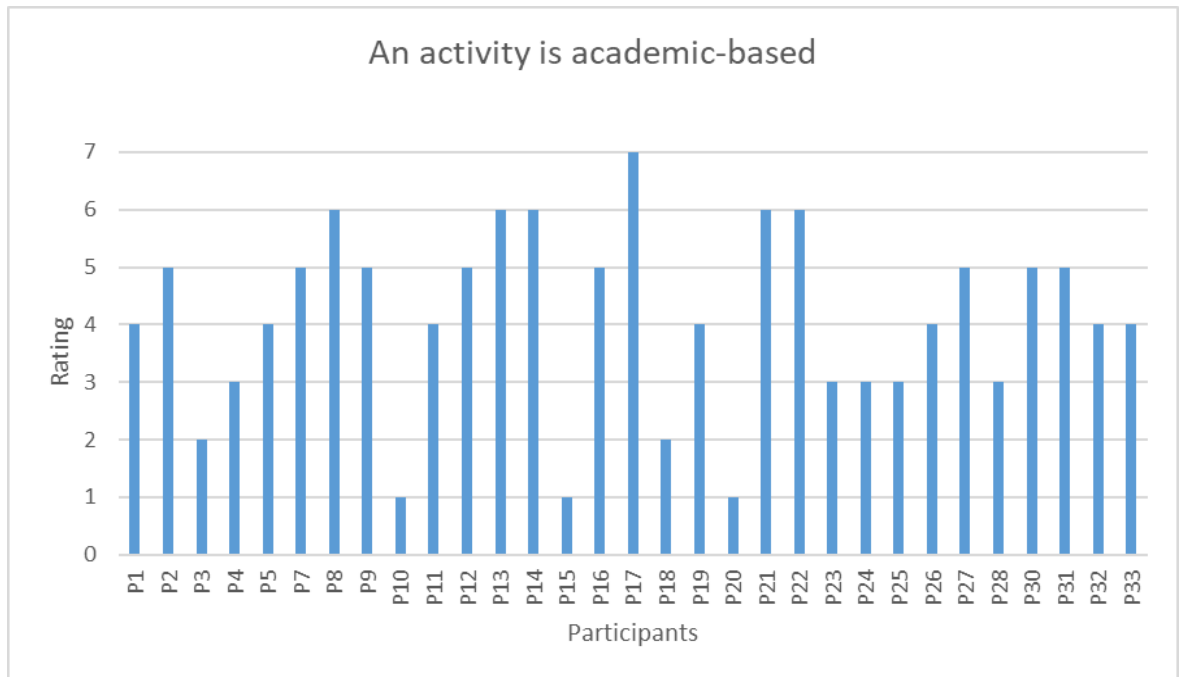


Table 7.2: Statement 3

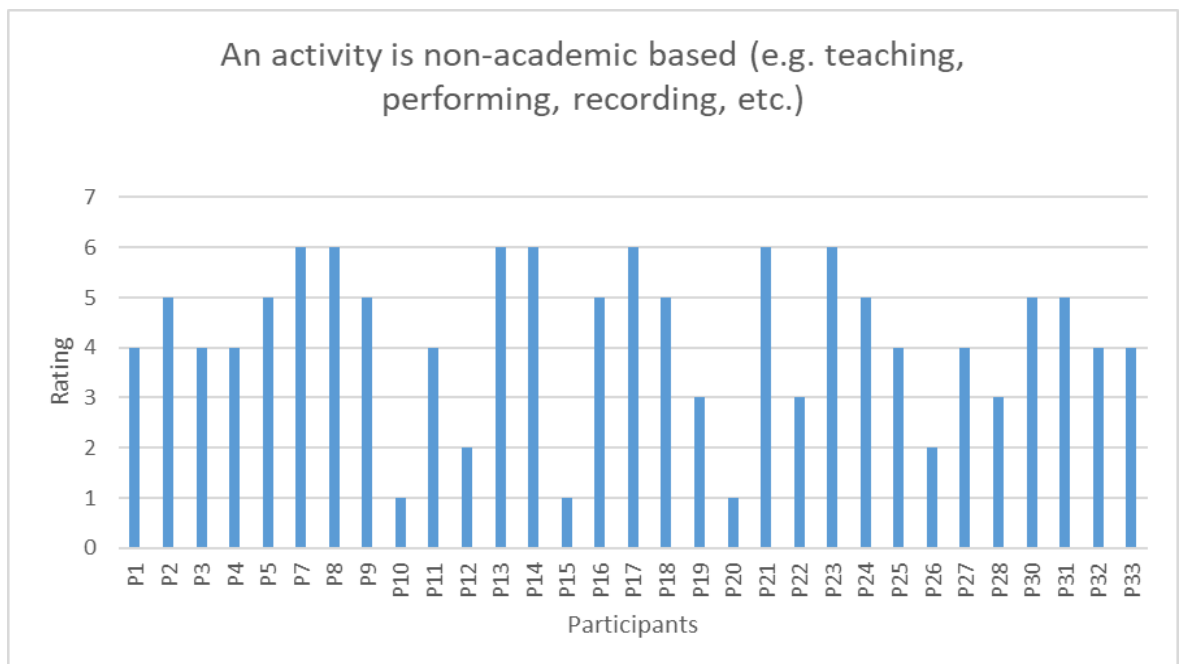


Table 7.2: Statement 4

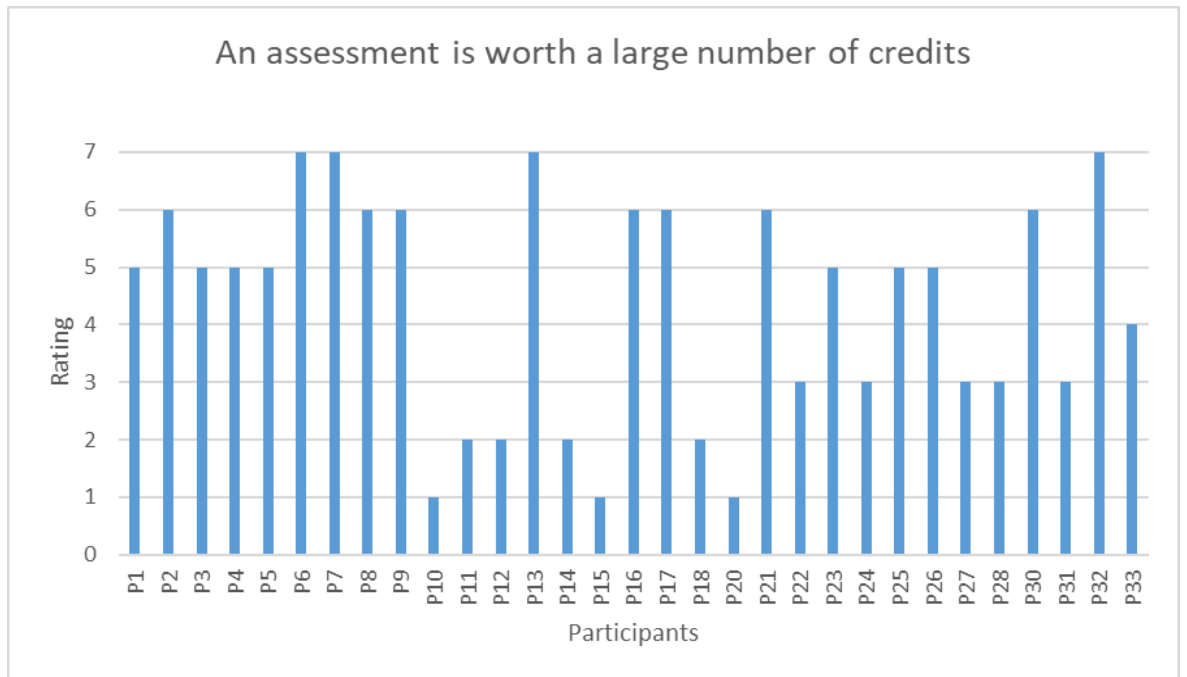


Table 7.2: Statement 5

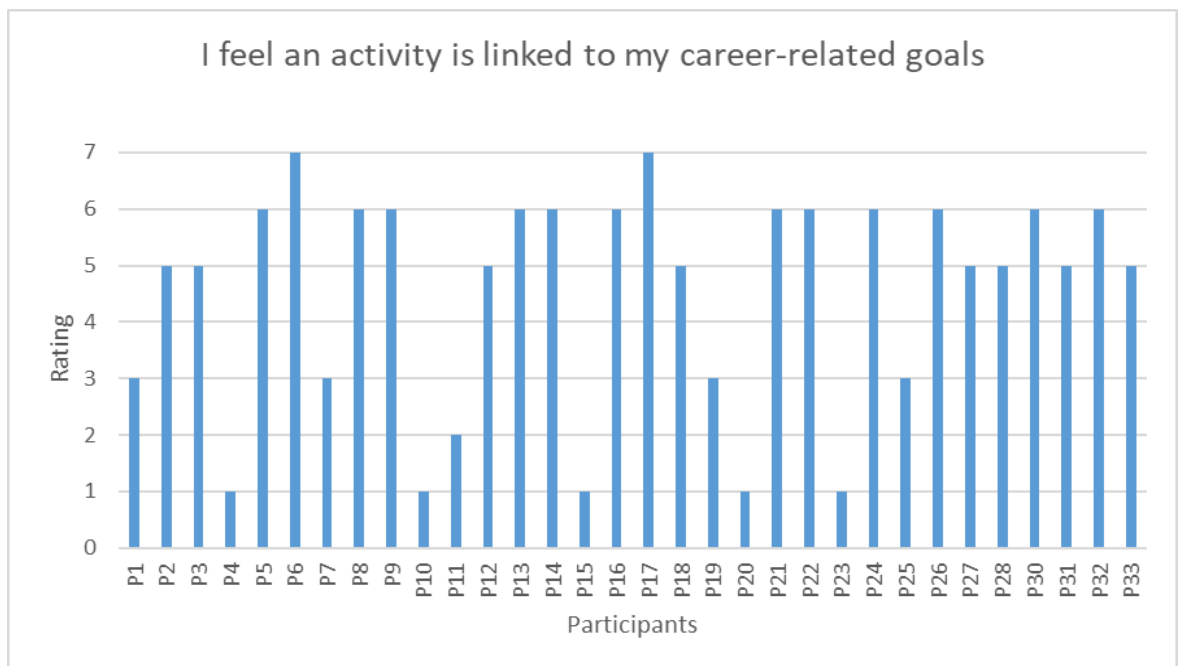
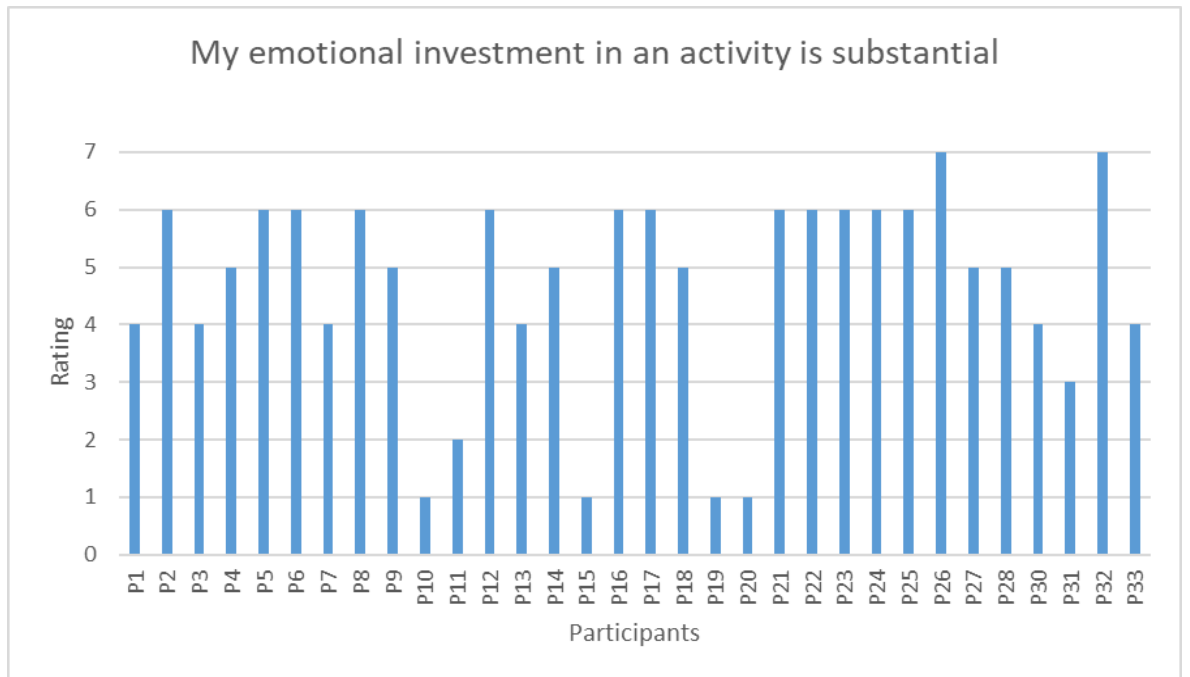


Table 7.2: Statement 6



**Graphic representation of Table 7.3**

Table 7.3: Statement 1

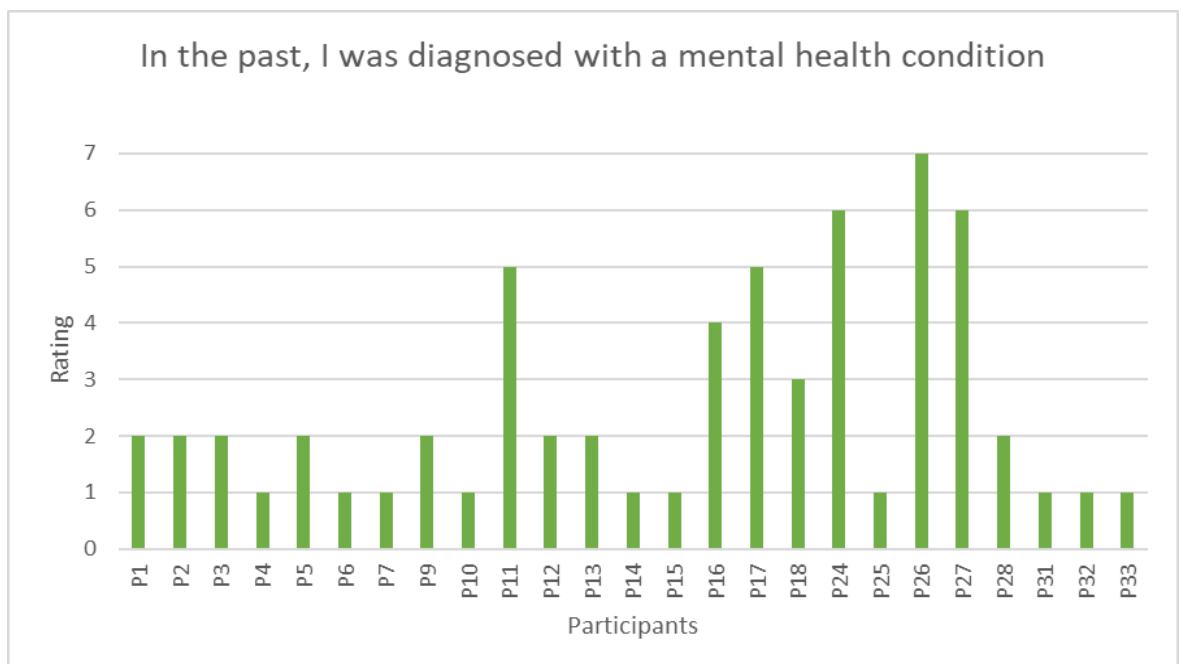


Table 7.3: Statement 2

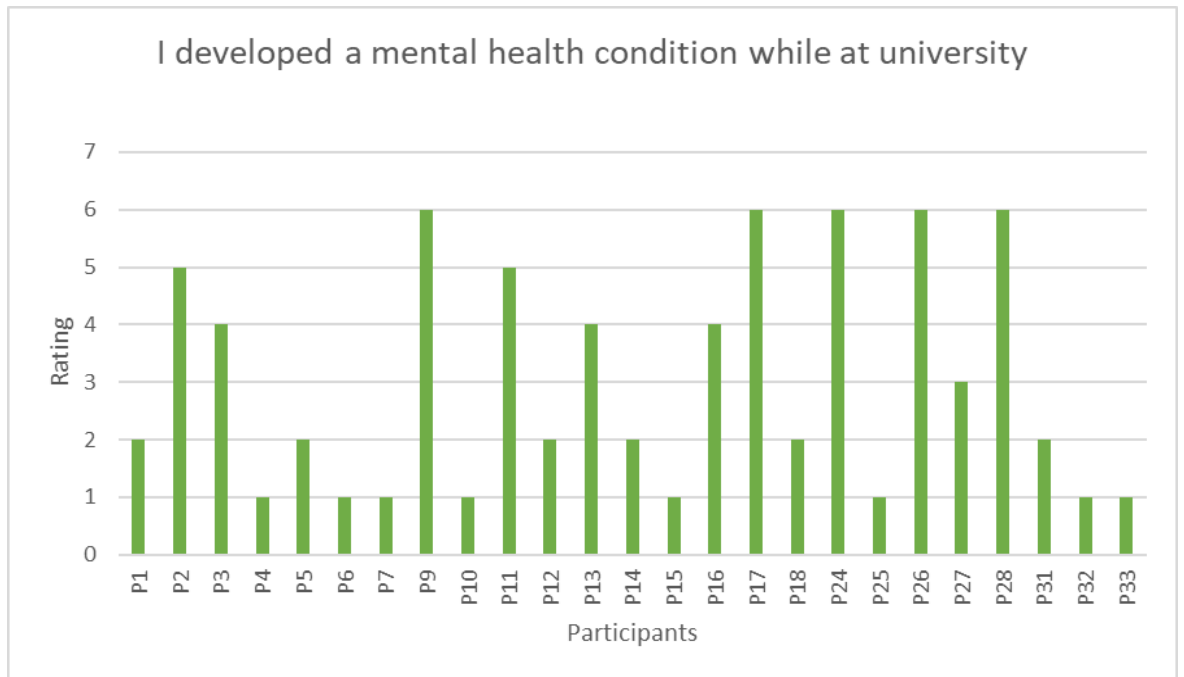


Table 7.3: Statement 3

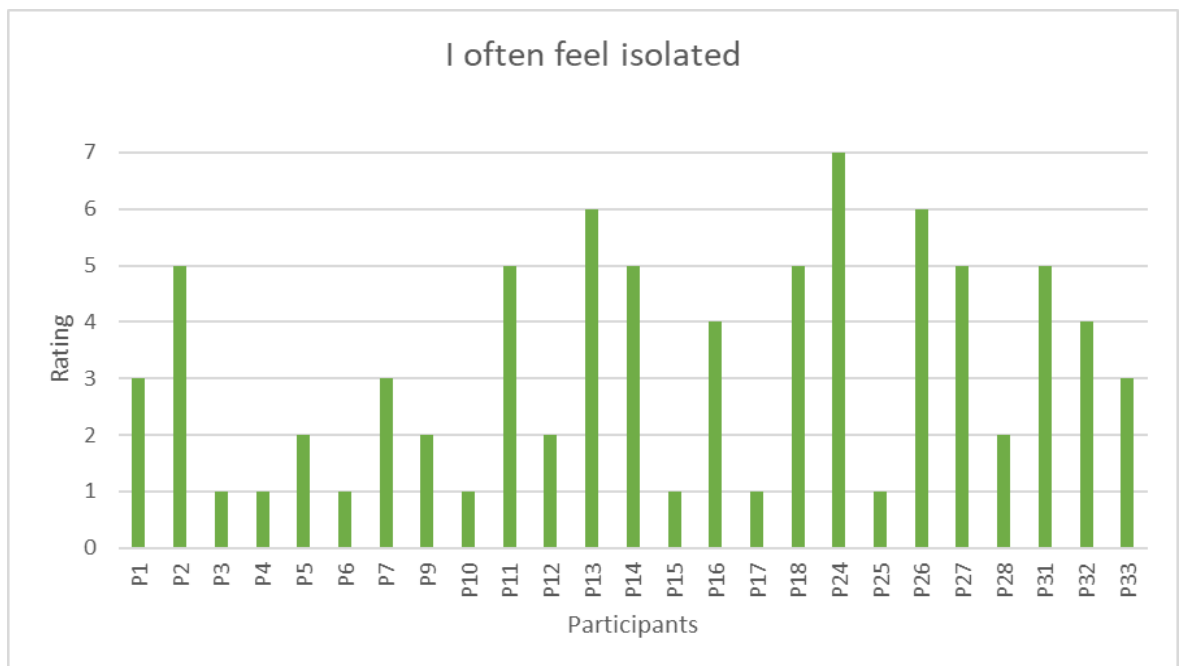


Table 7.3: Statement 4

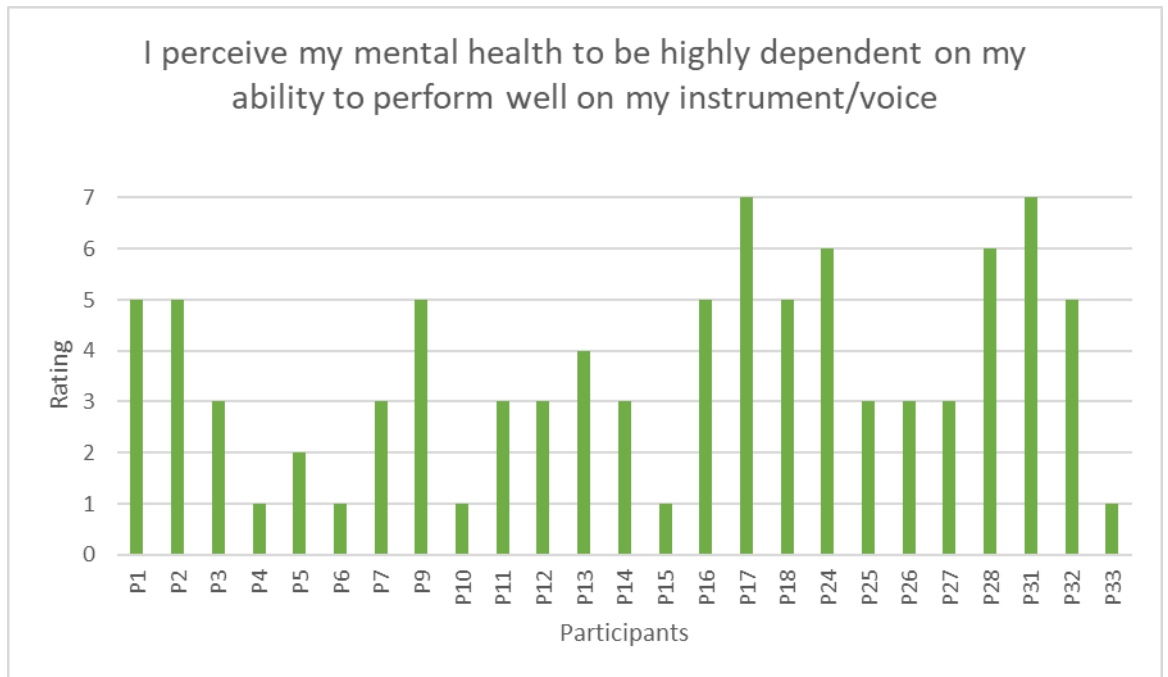


Table 7.3: Statement 5



Table 7.3: Statement 6

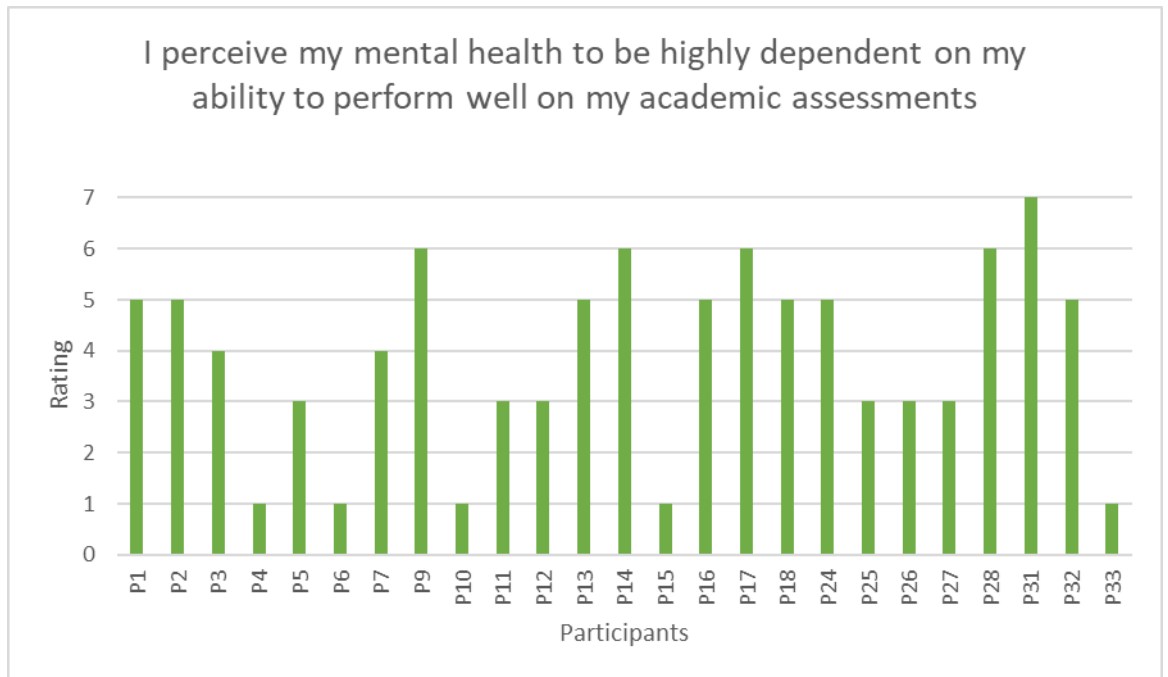
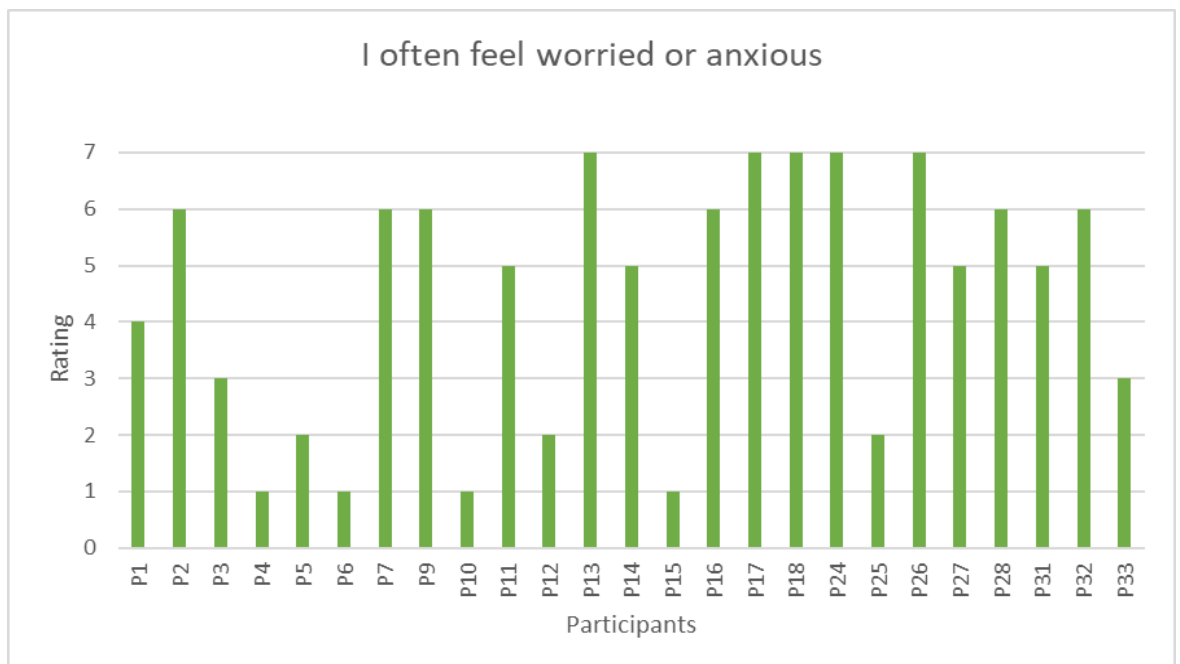


Table 7.3: Statement 7



## Appendix J. Interview questions: Instrumental and Vocal teachers

### Instrumental/Vocal teachers

Themes to discuss:

1. Teachers' views on competition among students
2. Teachers' perception of the atmosphere of the department in terms of competition
3. Teachers' thought on the institutional culture of the department towards competition
4. Teachers' perception of their pastoral role in relation to students' feelings of competition
5. Teachers' thought on assessment and feedback in relation to competition
6. Suggestions for further actions

1	How long have you been teaching in this department? Do you teach in other institutions? Are these institutions also university music departments or conservatoires or both?
2	Do you think competition is something that all music students in higher education experience?
3	How would you describe the atmosphere of this music department in regard to competition and students?
4	Are there any aspects of the department that you think foster competition among students? ( <i>prompts, if needed: orchestral auditions, end-of-year recital, comparison with peers, performance opportunities, masterclasses, students owning their instrument compared to those who borrow it</i> ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Which ones and why?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
5	Have you ever sensed that any of your students experience a feeling of competition within this department? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have you ever had/do you have conversations with your students about their feelings of competition?</li> <li>○ How did you notice that?</li> <li>○ Would you describe these as positive, negative, or in the middle?</li> <li>○ How have you dealt with that?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have you involved a member of the academic or administrative staff or other staff (for example other instrumental teachers, Julie Parker or the Open Door team)?</li> <li>○ Have you involved any student peers in supporting a student who experiences feelings of competition?</li> <li>○ Have you used any other resources (for example, written guides or something else)?</li> </ul>
6	<p>Have you taught international students in this department?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you think that the UK and international students that you teach have any differences in perceptions of competition?</li> <li>○ What might account for these differences?</li> <li>○ What particular steps have you taken to support international students dealing with experiences of competition?</li> <li>○ Would this differ from the support you give to home students? If so, why and how?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• NO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have you observed any differences between UK and international students in perceptions of competition?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
7	<p>Have you ever taught any second-study (name of instrument) in this department?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Have you observed any differences between first-study and second-study students in their perceptions of competition?</li> <li>○ What might account for these differences?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• NO (jump to next question)</li> </ul>
10	<p>Do you think performance activities and academic activities foster different feelings of competition among students in this department? In which ways? <i>(prompts, if needed: ensemble participation and writing essays, performance masterclass and attending lecture)</i></p>
11	<p>In your experience, do assessments foster a sense of competition among students?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why? <i>(prompts not all at once: is it the task itself, the visibility of students performing the assessment, or the way students get their results?)</i></li> <li>○ Are there any differences between performance and academic assessments?</li> <li>○ How do you think the departmental policy on marking impact on students' perceptions of competition? <i>(prompts: anonymous marking process, students' receiving marking and feedback on individual basis and not expose students' marking)</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why not?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
12	Do you think instrumental teachers, academic and administrative staff display any particular attitudes towards competition that students might notice?
13	Do you think it is inevitable that music students will experience some form of competition in a musical professional capacity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Is competition valuable if experienced in higher music education as part of preparation for the profession?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• NO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why not?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
14	Do you think that feelings of competition in this department impact on students' mental health? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>(if willing to talk about this)</i> Did you have any experience in this regard with your students?</li> <li>• What would you do to support a student experiencing mental health issues arising from competition?</li> <li>• Who else do you think might support students in this situation within the university?</li> </ul>
15	How might mental health be affected by feelings of competition?
18	Do you think it is part of your role as an instrumental teacher to provide students with pastoral support? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How do you fulfil that?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• NO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why not?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
19	<i>(if applicable)</i> Do you feel supported by the department in the fulfilment of your pastoral role?
20	Do you think that competition is a recognised issue within higher music education? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is it recognised within other institutions you work in?</li> <li>- Is it recognised within this department?</li> </ul>
21	Do you think the department puts in place measures to reduce feelings of competition among students? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What these are?</li> <li>○ How effective do you think these are?</li> <li>○ Did you receive any feedback from your students about these measures?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• NO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do you think the department should put in place any measures?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
22	Would you like to see any changes in the institutional culture of the department in regard to students' perceptions of competition? If so, what kind of changes?
23	Do you think it might be useful for music students to attend any event in the department about competition? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What kind of events would students most benefit from?</li> <li>○ Who would deliver this?</li> <li>○ Would you, as an instrumental teacher, want to be involved?</li> <li>• NO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why not?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
24	<p>Do you think that the situation resulted from the Covid-19 outbreak impacted on or changed your students' perceptions of competition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ How?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
25	<p><i>(if applicable) How do perceptions of competition in this department compare with those in other institutions where you teach/have taught? (prompts, if needed: competition among students, institutional culture, support provision, students' feelings of competition towards assessments and other opportunities)</i></p>
26	<p>Do you have any further comment on aspects of competition and mental health in this department?</p>