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A-level music decline and disadvantage attainment gaps

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In March 2021, the Education Policy Institute reported on disadvantage attainment gaps in 16-19 education (Tuckett et al., 2021). The present discussion paper draws on this EPI report and outlines key data relevant to music educational contexts.

The disadvantage gap grows wider with each educational phase up to the end of KS4, but much less is known about the gap at 16-19. Using students' free school meal status during their last six years of school as an indicator of disadvantage, and an attainment measure based on the qualifications and grades they achieved between the age of 16 and 19, the EPI have undertaken new exploratory research and present a provisional methodology to fill this critical evidence gap. The recent EPI report identified disadvantage gaps across local authorities. We have extracted data for local authorities in the Midlands region in Table 1, and combined it with publicly available data on A-level entries from 2020.

Table 1 - A-level disadvantage gap and A-level music entries in selected local authorities.

Local Authority	Disadvantage attainment gap, A level grade	Number of disadvantaged students (16-19, all quals.)	Total A-level music entries 2019/20	Total number of A-level entries in 2020 (excl. BTEC and Vocational quals.)	Proportion of A-level music entries as % of A-level population
Warwickshire	3.9	1065	39	2947	1.32%
Stoke-on-Trent	3.9	537	11	712	1.54%
Telford & Wrekin	3.8	399	14	724	1.93%
Staffordshire	3.5	1428	21	2731	0.77%
Coventry	3.3	832	8	1346	0.59%
Leicestershire	3	723	36	2606	1.38%
Solihull	2.9	1225	16	1479	1.08%
Sandwell	2.6	1236	6	1378	0.44%
Wolverhampton	2.5	693	16	1067	1.50%
Birmingham	2.1	4211	35	4586	0.76%

Table 1 shows those local authorities with disadvantage attainment gaps greater than 2 grades in the Midlands region (for the nationwide list, see the Appendices of Tucket et al. (2021)). For a musical context, we have included A-level music entries for these local authorities in 2019/20 in blue highlights. Across these local authorities, the proportion of students taking A-level music is approximately 1% as a total of the A-level population, in line with the proportion of national uptake, though there is some significant regional variation. The 16-19 disadvantage attainment gap has been calculated by EPI within each local authority as the equivalent number of A-level grades that disadvantaged students within each local authority are behind non-disadvantaged students nationally.

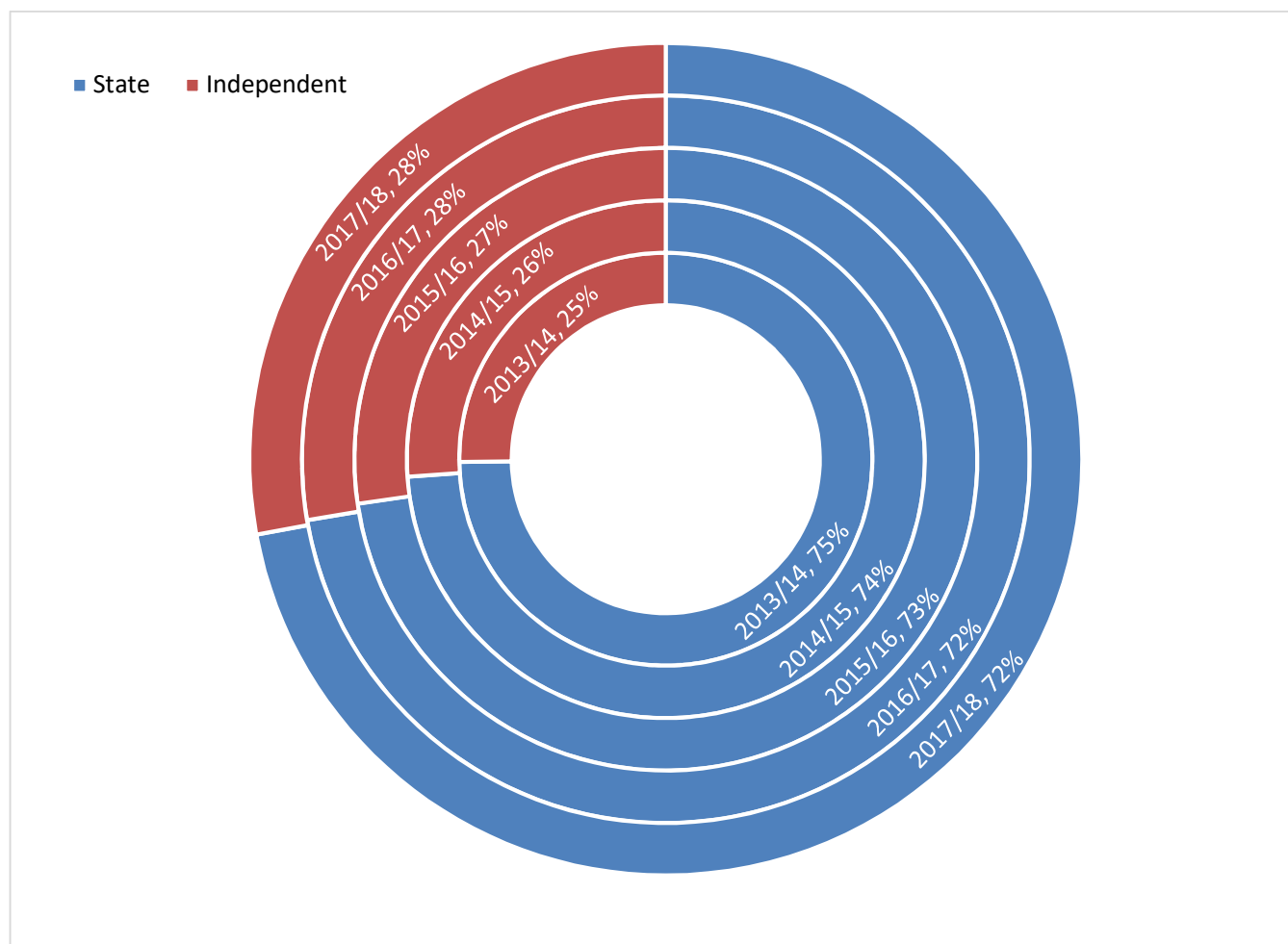
This means that although Birmingham has far more disadvantaged students than adjacent local authorities, Warwickshire actually has a wider attainment gap, on a par with Stoke-on-Trent. Solihull has a narrower attainment gap than Warwickshire, but wider than Birmingham (which itself has over 4,000 disadvantaged young people). In terms of A-level music, though, Warwickshire has a much larger proportion of its students taking A-level music, albeit still a very small headcount of students. Indeed, the three local authorities with the widest attainment gap, are those with higher levels of A-level music entry as a proportion of the total number of A-level entries. By contrast, Birmingham and Sandwell have much smaller attainment gaps, but proportionally fewer A-level entries. This observation might be explained in part by a small number of schools in local authorities maintaining A-level music as small clusters, rather than entries being spread more evenly across an area. Whilst A-level music may not be the right course for all students, and is far from a perfect qualification, however, it is a good fit for some, and to not offer the subject in a wide range of schools is to deny students the opportunity to choose - **a student cannot choose a qualification that is not offered to them.**

What we know nationally is that a disproportionately large number of A-level music entries come from independent schools, and that the most deprived local authorities enter a very small number of students for A-level music or, in some cases, none at all. In 2018, the last year for which school-level data was made fully available when numbers of entries are below 5, we identified that the proportion of entries from independent schools was growing steadily each year.

Table 2 - Proportions of state/independent entry centres for A-level music from 2013/14 to 2017/18.

Entry centres	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
State	74.8%	73.9%	72.7%	72.3%	72.1%
Independent	25.2%	26.1%	27.3%	27.7%	27.9%

Figure 1 - Proportions of state/independent entry centres for A-level music from 2013/14 to 2017/18.

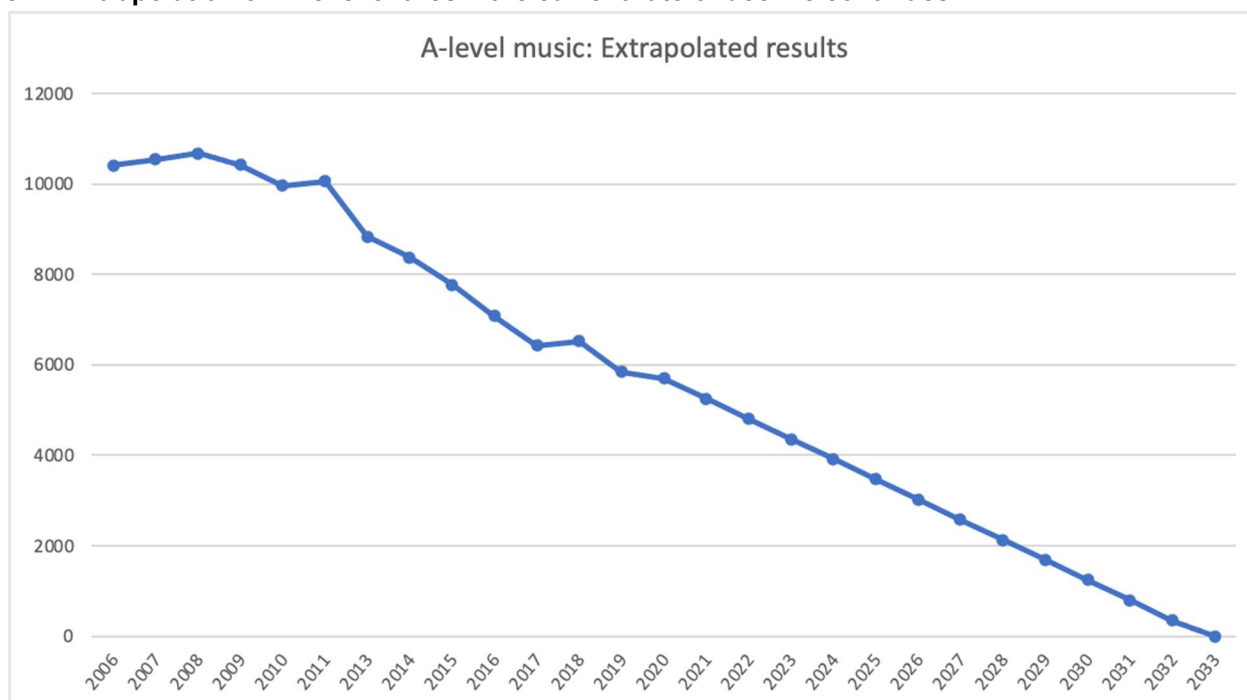


Those who lack the means to support private instrumental study are unlikely to have sufficient income to pay for school fees, even if a bursary supports them to a greater or lesser extent. Clearly A-level music is just the tip of the iceberg and does not represent the totality of musical activity that may be taking place in schools at KS5, but it could be seen as something of an indicator for the number of advanced musicians coming through the developmental pipeline in these local authorities. Recent research on GCSE music has shown that the disadvantage gap could be as high as 20.1 months at KS4 (the widest gap across all subjects) meaning that disadvantaged students progressing to KS5 are already likely to be at a significant disadvantage (Hutchinson et al., 2020: 12–13). The low numbers of entries from these selected local authorities in the Midlands region are a cause for concern, particularly so where disadvantage attainment gaps are high. Indeed, undertaking a simple linear extrapolation from the current rates of decline in entries in recent years shows A-level music is likely to have zero entries by 2033 if the current rate of decline continues.

Based on our previous analysis of A-level data, the opportunity to study A-level music seems likely to end first for those children who are at a disadvantage, especially as we are seeing a decline in both the number of pupils being entered and the number of schools running the qualification (Whittaker et al., 2019). Given the more precarious position of KS5 music in many disadvantaged

schools, there are significant knock-on implications on the wider landscape of musical activity in these school contexts.

Figure 2 - Extrapolation of A-level entries if the current rate of decline continues.



This trajectory is a cause for concern, not least because the children who would take A-level music in 2033 are already in primary schools now. Whilst we are aware that we have only undertaken analysis of entry data in areas local to us in Birmingham, nonetheless similar patterns are likely to be discerned throughout the country. To facilitate action and inspire debate to address this issue quickly, we offer questions to stimulate thinking and discussions for key stakeholders.

Questions for consideration

- Do we know which schools are currently offering A-level music in our area?
- As part of the pipeline, what do we know about GCSE music and other KS4 groups locally?
- What musical activities are engaging disadvantaged young people in our area outside of formal qualifications?
- How many children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue through to advanced stages of musical learning?
- What can local Music Education Hub data tell us about this? For example, how many children in receipt of pupil premium are continuing to advanced levels?
- Where A-level is no longer being offered, has it been replaced with an alternative qualification?
 - If so, what alternatives are being chosen? Why are these being selected?
 - Or is advanced in-school musical learning stopping altogether?
- Entry numbers for GCSE have been dropping. To what extent is this fall a result of a shrinking pipeline of young musicians having instrumental music lessons?
- What impact will this have in the near future on HEI undergraduate applications across all institutions, styles, and genres of music degree study?
- Looking ahead, what impact might this have on the future music education workforce and the next generation of music teachers and music leaders?

References

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