

Written evidence submitted by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM)

Instrumental Music Teaching During Lockdown

This paper is presented by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) in response to the call for evidence from the Education Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, and the DCMS Committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on its sectors.

ABRSM is the UK's largest music education body, one of its largest music publishers and the world's leading provider of music exams, holding over 650,000 assessments in more than 90 countries every year. As a registered charity, we also make significant donations towards music education initiatives around the world.

Founded in 1889, we have a long and storied history. But our mission has stayed the same: to nurture a love for music, and to inspire achievement in it. At ABRSM, we believe that everyone, wherever they're from, should have access to high-quality music-learning.

Executive Summary

Following a survey of 300 of our customers and examiners who work as instrumental music teachers, we have found that 87% have been able to effectively adapt to online teaching with 39% reporting that their learners have made better progress than normal. Many also reported an improved relationship with parents who have developed a better understanding of the value of music lessons and are now better able to support learners when they are practising their instrument.

However, both teachers and learners have encountered barriers which have limited the effectiveness of online music lessons. The biggest blocker appears to be intermittent internet access in some areas, and poor quality audio from video conferencing software. Some learners are also struggling because they may not have access to their instrument or a quiet place in which to have their lesson undisturbed. Those teachers who have been unable to continue teaching may need to rely on government financial support schemes until face to face lessons can resume.

The lockdown presents a unique opportunity for the music education sector and government to better understand how technology can be successfully used to provide access to music tuition and to support greater progress. It is also an opportunity to explore how parents' attitudes have changed and how they can be better engaged in their child's education.

We make the following recommendations:

1. We believe the government should extend the Self Employment Income Support Scheme to October, in line with the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.
2. We hope that the government will move quickly to improve the broadband infrastructure everywhere as promised in the 2020 budget, and we support calls for the government to expand access to devices and 4G internet to disadvantaged learners from all year groups who need it until schools can reopen.
3. We support the decision to return learners to schools as soon as it is safe to do so in order to limit the potential disadvantage.
4. We recommend the government investigate and provides guidance for music groups on how they can return to face to face rehearsals and performances as the lockdown eases.
5. We believe the government should encourage schools to re-establish all creative arts classes, including extra-curricular activities such as instrumental lessons as soon as it is safe to do so, ensuring learners do not lose out.

6. We recommend that more research is done to understand changes in parental attitude towards education during the lockdown and whether any lessons can be learned about how to engage with parents more effectively in the future.
7. We recommend that further research is done to identify best practice in the use of technology in music education and to embed this into the next National Plan.

Introduction

The lockdown has been devastating for performing arts with live performances cancelled in all settings for the foreseeable future. In spite of this, there has been a surge in the sales of musical instruments and associated equipment, which has prompted some commentators, including the Music Industries Association¹, to suggest that we are seeing a “renaissance in music making”². Sales of our ABRSM music publications remaining have remained strong throughout this period, despite the worldwide suspension of its exams. Despite an initial dip at the beginning of the lockdown, music streaming and physical sales of CDs and vinyl have returned to their former strength³. There is clear evidence that music forms an important part of people’s lives during lockdown, and it seems many are using their extra time to either take up a new instrument or re-engage with an instrument they once played.

“I have received numerous emails from parents mentioning that it has really helped to have some normality in their child’s life and they are very grateful for this opportunity.” (Teacher, ABRSM Teacher Voices Survey, May 2020)

In order to understand more about the impact of the lockdown on teaching and learning, we conducted a short survey with around 300 of our customers and examiners who work as instrumental music teachers. The responses we collected reflect the overall demographic profile of our customer base and may help to provide some insight into trends in music education more broadly. This paper is set out in four sections with the first three covering the impact on teachers, learners and parents. In the final section we set out our hopes for the future. As argued in the Music Commission report⁴, we believe that it is vital all learners have an opportunity to progress in music. The lockdown presents a unique opportunity to better understand how technology can be used to improve access to music education and learner progression.

Impact on teachers

Our research shows that 87% of instrumental music teachers are teaching in some form through the lockdown. The lockdown has presented a useful opportunity for music teachers to explore how they can use digital technology in their teaching practice. Our research has shown that 9 out of 10 music teachers have never taught lessons online before. Overall, most teachers reported that, after a steep learning curve, they now feel confident using video conferencing applications to run their lessons, showing that many have successfully adapted to teaching during lockdown.

“I’m glad this has given me the opportunity to get used to it ... I will continue to offer both face to face and online lessons after lockdown.” (Teacher, ABRSM Teacher Voices Survey, May 2020)

Of those still teaching, 39% believe that their learners have made better progress in their music following the lockdown, suggesting that for many, online music lessons are an effective way of supporting learners to progress.

However, for a minority of teachers, technology has proven to be a barrier and those who are now teaching online are encountering challenges. The vast majority (93%) of teachers delivering online lessons reported that teaching online is more difficult than teaching a face to face lesson. A key sticking point is the quality of audio achieved through video conferencing software, making it difficult to assess a learner’s control of tone and articulation. The delay experienced on video calls also means that live accompaniment is impossible. Teachers are often the main source of tuning and instrument maintenance support for learners, but this proves very challenging via online means.

¹ [Music Industries Association \(2020\)](#)

² Hissing, S. (2020) [Sales of Instruments and Music Gear Are Soaring. Will Quarantine Spark a Renaissance?](#) Rolling Stone

³ Fields, N. (2020) [CD and vinyl sales slide in lockdown — but are still core to chart success](#) The Financial Times

⁴ The Music Commission (2019) [Retuning Our Ambition for Music Learning: Every Child Taking Music Further](#)
ABRSM – Instrumental Music Teaching During Lockdown – May 2020

“generally students do not bring harps to lessons unless there are tuning or string problems, which are quick to rectify in a face to face lesson. I have managed to tune a harp on line giving very precise instructions - but it was very time consuming” (Teacher, ABRSM Teacher Voices Survey, May 2020)

We asked teachers about their awareness and usage of the government’s financial support schemes, such as the Self Employed Income Support Scheme. Around two thirds of respondents reported that they are aware of the scheme, but only 29% believe they are eligible and 17% are unsure. Only 15% of respondents reported that they have applied to the scheme. Whilst there appears to be low take up, more teachers reported using this scheme than any other available. It is unclear whether the low take up is due to a lack of understanding about the scheme or because teachers have largely been able to maintain their income. The Self Employed Income Support Scheme remains an important lifeline for workers in the creative industries and freelance teachers who have seen their work disappear. **We believe the government should extend the Self Employment Income Support Scheme to October, in line with the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.**

Impact on learners

In our research, we asked teachers to tell us what challenges their learners have faced in accessing online music lessons. A quarter of teachers reported that their learners do not have access to adequate devices in order to have online lessons, however the greatest barrier appears to be a stable internet connection, with 41% of teachers highlighting this as a challenge for learners and 11% listing it as a challenge for themselves. In the budget published in March 2020, the government promised £5billion to improve high speed broadband infrastructure for the most rural parts of the UK⁵. Our findings are yet another reminder of how important it is for all communities in the UK to have access to high speed broadband. Over half of our respondents confirmed they intend to offer online lessons in future, especially given the long term need for remote working and to combat other logistical problems. **We hope that the government will move quickly to improve the broadband infrastructure everywhere, and we support calls⁶ for the government to expand access to devices and 4G internet to all school aged learners from low income families who need them.**

“This has really shown up how important good internet is. In a rural area we often struggle with the signal breaking during lessons which is disruptive.” (Teacher, ABRSM Teacher Voices Survey, May 2020)

A key issue highlighted during the lockdown by many education commentators is access to a quiet place in which to study. Recent research⁷ has shown that the majority of poor and middle income primary school children do not have a private place to work. Of our respondents, 31% reported that learners do not have an appropriate quiet place in which to have their lesson. Teachers also reported that learners feel uncomfortable performing at home. Learners need to have a safe space in order to develop their creative skills and their confidence, which for some, cannot be done at home.

“I mainly teach singing, and a good portion of my students aren't comfortable singing in their own homes (because of inhibition, or fear of disturbing neighbours etc...)” (Teacher, ABRSM Teacher Voices Survey, May 2020)

Access to instruments was highlighted as another issue, with 15% of teachers reporting their learners do not have access to an instrument or have only got access to a poor quality one. Clearly, access to

⁵ HM Treasury (2020) [Budget 2020](#)

⁶ Teach First (2020) [Backing schools for a brighter tomorrow: The Education Committee’s Inquiry into the Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children’s Services Teach First Submission](#)

⁷ Andrew, A. et al (2020) [Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children’s experiences during home learning](#) Institute for Fiscal Studies

physical resources, such as rehearsal space and musical instruments, is important to ensuring all learners can progress effectively. Learners from poorer backgrounds are likely to suffer greater disadvantage as a result of being unable to access these resources. **We support the decision to return learners to schools as soon as it is safe to do so in order to limit the potential disadvantage.**

From our survey, 33% of teachers reported that their learners have lost motivation because they have nothing to work towards such as concerts or exams. ABRSM provides graded music exams which can be used to motivate learners and help to mark their progression. Like many others in our sector, we have had to cancel all face to face exams for the time being, and we are working hard to provide remotely examined alternatives for both performance and music theory. Mindful of the direction from the Secretary of State for Education⁸ and the extraordinary regulatory framework introduced by Ofqual⁹, we are currently offering adapted assessments for year 13 learners who need to complete their grade 6, 7 or 8 exam as part of their application to further or higher education in autumn. We believe that learners at this critical juncture in their education career should not be prevented from progressing as a result of the pandemic.

Despite the lockdown, many choirs and ensembles have been encouraging their members to continue practising and holding rehearsals via video conference, although limitations in technology make this very challenging. Ensembles have also been creating recordings by asking their members to film their parts and then stitching them together. However, all opportunities for learners to play or sing together face to face have been lost. National and local ensembles for children and adults have had to stop face to face rehearsals and cancel planned performances and learning programmes for spring and summer. Whilst online rehearsals have helped to keep learners engaged in their music, it cannot replace the value of face to face rehearsal and performance. These groups are a crucial source of community for many people, and they form an important part of local economies, providing work for musicians and music directors and creating business for venues. **We recommend the government investigates and provides guidance for music groups on how they can return to face to face rehearsals and performances as the lockdown eases.**

Impact on parents

Some teachers have found that parents have become more engaged in their child's learning and are better able to support learners between lessons. Teachers are developing better relationships with parents as a result. This points to an exciting opportunity to engage more regularly with parents and to help encourage more learners to have music lessons.

“parents are taking an active interest, my relationship with them has blossomed, and progress has been in most cases far more impressive than with weekly lessons in school.” (Teacher, ABRSM Teacher Voices Survey, May 2020)

However, one third of teachers reported that parents are sceptical about the effectiveness of online lessons, and 20% reported that parents believe online lessons should be cheaper. Despite a large majority of music teachers continuing to teach online, 69% of those who are have seen a decrease in the number of lessons they teach. Of these, 72% of teachers reported that one of the reason learners had stopped their lessons was because “parents and learners do not want online music lessons”.

In the Music Commission report¹⁰, we highlighted the importance of finding ways to engage directly with parents in order to promote learner progression. The feedback from our survey indicates that sharing content directly with parents and allowing them to observe lessons helps to improve their understanding of the value of music lessons and gives them the tools they need to support learners when practicing. **We recommend that more research is done to understand changes in parents’**

⁸ Secretary of State for Education, (2020) [Direction Issued to the Chief Regulator at Ofqual](#)

⁹ Ofqual, (2020) [Extraordinary Regulatory Framework](#)

¹⁰ The Music Commission (2019) [Retuning Our Ambition for Music Learning: Every Child Taking Music Further](#)

attitudes towards education during the lockdown and whether any lessons can be learned about how to engage with parents more effectively in the future.

Looking to the future

As we emerge from the lockdown, focus needs to return to bolstering the music education eco system. The best way to achieve this is to ensure that all children and young people have access to high quality music education at school. Not only is this important for the individual development and wellbeing of each learner, it also ensures we can maintain a sustainable and diverse supply of UK talent for our world renowned music industry. The creative industries, including music, have been one of the most resilient sectors in the wake of the global financial crisis, growing much faster than the UK economy as a whole¹¹. They offer real hope for long term growth as our economy recovers from the lockdown.

While schools have been closed, they have understandably not been expected to deliver the full national curriculum. We are keen for learners to return to receiving a full and varied education as soon as possible, including high quality music education. Although measures such as the new Ofsted inspection framework appears to have begun encouraging greater focus on cultural and creative subjects, we have seen creative arts disappearing from schools for some time. **We believe the government should encourage schools to re-establish all creative arts classes, including extra-curricular activities such as instrumental lessons as soon as it is safe to do so, ensuring learners do not lose out.** We have been working directly with the Department for Education (DfE) to produce a model music curriculum, aimed at supporting high quality music teaching in all schools for key stages 1, 2 and 3. Our hope is that this will be available for schools to review and implement for the start of the next academic year.

Prior to the lockdown, the DfE completed a consultation on the future of the National Plan for Music Education. This is a much needed review of the music education ecosystem. We believe that it is important for the DfE to return to this work as soon as possible. This will help to alleviate uncertainty for music education hubs. We also now have a unique opportunity to consider the lessons learned during the lockdown as part of the review, and in particular how technology has been used effectively. As was highlighted in the Music Commission report¹², technology has so far been under-used in music education and more could be done to use it to enhance learner progression. **We recommend that further research is done to identify best practice in the use of technology in music education and to embed this into the next National Plan.**

May 2020

¹¹ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2020) [DCMS Sectors Economic Estimates \(provisional\) Gross Value Added](#)

¹² The Music Commission (2019) [Retuning Our Ambition for Music Learning: Every Child Taking Music Further](#)
ABRSM – Instrumental Music Teaching During Lockdown – May 2020