

April 2026



Championing University Music Toolkit



Welcome!

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Championing University Music Toolkit



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The last decade has been a bruising, and at times destructive, period for many university music departments in the UK, as indeed it has been for colleagues working across the arts and humanities.

While those colleagues that work in specialist arts institutions, such as conservatoires, face their own difficulties and financial pressures, the devastating impact of cuts and recent closures has been particularly acute in the traditional university environment: those institutions in which music courses of all types are delivered in departments, academic schools or dedicated subject areas that are part of a multi-faculty and internally competitive model.

Anyone working as a Head of Music, Programme Director or Admissions Lead will know all too well the kinds of pressures that revolve around the year-to-year focus on student numbers, as the principal source of income and sustainability. In our volatile times and with such a challenging external environment in the UK in particular, few feel confident about the immediate future direction in UK higher education, or indeed for the arts

and employment more broadly. But despair is a self-fulfilling if entirely understandable response.

Having supported departments through instances of instability, [Music Mark](#) and the [Musicians' Union](#) have collaborated on this toolkit to offer actionable guidance, bringing together what they have observed through advising on threats of closure or staff reduction. This toolkit is not a panacea for these complex challenges, but it is designed to help colleagues on the ground to help fight their corner as effectively as possible.



Many of the elements outlined in what follows may be things that you and your team are already working on; perhaps some others are things you would like help to better understand, while others may be things to address in the medium-term. Since every department or subject area is unique in terms of its profile and position relative to its own institutional structures and power dynamics, you will know how best to adapt and apply the tips and advice contained below.



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Having a clear, accurate picture of your departmental and sector data is essential

Whether you are responding to budget pressures or exploring opportunities for growth. Universities increasingly use external consultants (such as the company [DataHE](#)) to review student numbers, financial performance and to recommend restructuring. These reviews are heavily data-driven, but the data does not always capture discipline-specific phenomena in Music. It is therefore critical that the data held within your department, and the data that is publicly available about your students, is not only accurate and consistent but also effectively contextualised.



A key step is checking your internal records against external sources such as [HESA](#), [Office for Students](#) and [UCAS](#) (outlined below). Being confident in your data puts you in a stronger position when engaging with senior management, consultants, and strategic planning processes.



Areas for Consideration

To engage meaningfully with institutional priorities (for example, Widening Participation) and to understand trends within your own student population, you need a solid grasp of your departmental data. When thinking about factors that influence recruitment, start with the following areas:

- Student Characteristics
- Age
- Gender
- Disability
- Social Mobility
- Parental Education
- Domicile (Home/EU/International)
- Staff Characteristics
- Research Excellence Framework ([REF](#))
- Teaching Excellence Framework ([TEF](#))
- Staff-Student Ratio
- Graduate Outcomes
- Entry Requirements

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

The Higher Education Statistics Agency, part of [Jisc](#), 'collect, assure and disseminate data about higher education (HE) in the UK'.¹ HESA publish a comprehensive breakdown of staff, student and graduate data, such as:

- Student numbers per subject, level, mode of study, student profile and institution
- Student characteristics (e.g. gender, age, disability status, religious belief, ethnicity, socio-economic classification, parental education level and address)
- Staff characteristics (e.g. personal characteristics, salaries, employment conditions, roles and region)

HESA data can also be used for benchmarking, allowing you to compare your department or institution with others.

In addition, HESA publishes financial data for institutions, including income and expenditure, research funding, tuition fee income, donations, investments, and capital spending. This can be useful to monitor to see the financial situation where you are working.



Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)

UCAS releases data after the three undergraduate deadlines and the conservatoire deadline, analysing the key trends in addition to publishing the raw data. This includes information on areas such as:

- Applicant characteristics (e.g. domicile, age, gender, Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and POLAR4 quintile)
- Application numbers by subject and institution
- Offers and acceptances (e.g. offer and acceptance rates, average entry requirements, entry route (such as clearing))

This data is particularly useful for understanding recruitment patterns and changes in applicant behaviour.

Graduate Outcomes

[Graduate Outcomes](#) (previously referred to as Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE)) are collected by HESA.¹ Procedural aspects of the data collection mean that the results do not favour the creative industries, as graduates are encouraged to complete the survey fifteen months after graduation which is relatively early in the career of those in the arts in comparison to other sectors. The survey also asks respondents to provide information about their employment during the previous week, which may not accurately reflect an average month's income for a freelance musician or portfolio worker. For example, performers may be more active during December, meaning that the results will be detrimentally skewed.

A practical measure that staff can take to aid this inequality in data collection is encouraging staff and student survey literacy. As there is little likelihood that this process will change to better favour the creative industries, it is important to be able to defend this data if required. By equipping students with understanding of the way in which Graduate Outcomes data is used, they will be able to complete the survey with truly representative information regarding their career.

National Student Survey (NSS)

[National Student Survey](#) (NSS) results act as a further mechanism for senior management to assess a department's performance and reputation. As the results are publicly available

on [Discover Uni](#) and feed into some university rankings, it is important to ensure that you are actively encouraging students to complete the survey, explaining how it impacts the department and how their contributions are valued. Whilst feedback may not always be positive, it is important to demonstrate how student voice is being addressed through 'you said, we did' communications and correspondence with senior leadership to show that you are proactively working with the student body. This also places further emphasis on student committees, ensuring that you capture issues and endeavour to resolve them before they are raised in the NSS.

Regulated Qualifications

Trends in vocational and regulated qualifications can point to emerging directions in music education and influence both programme content and entry requirements in higher education. Music-related qualifications include Cambridge OCR, International Baccalaureate, Pearson, University of Arts London (UAL), City and Guilds, NCFE, and Rockscool London, as well as graded examinations offered by organisations such as ABRSM, LAMDA, and Trinity College London. The UK Government releases [data sets](#) on a quarterly basis which include the number of entries for each examination. This is also available on a national basis for the devolved nations. Monitoring these trends can help inform curriculum development and recruitment strategies.

1. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/>



Sector-Wide Data

To be able to articulate the state of the wider music sector and the value of a high-quality music education, it is useful to keep abreast with sector-wide data which provides an accurate and reliable account of the health of the industry. This can be gained through numerous music organisations who actively commission or carry out research into the trends of the music industry.



Internal Data

Some of the most valuable data will not be held centrally by the university, so departments should put systems in place to collect and monitor it themselves. Useful data includes:

- Number of staff members and students using departmental facilities
- Participation in extra-curricular activities
- Attendance at concerts, events, lecture series, workshops, and masterclasses (staff, students, and public)
- Outreach activity (number of schools engaged, number of pupils reached, etc.)

This data is especially useful when evidencing impact, engagement, and value.

In 2023, the Musicians' Union and Help Musicians undertook a [Musicians' Census](#) which gathered responses from almost 6,000 respondents. Similarly, organisations such as [UK Music](#) and [The Independent Society of Musicians](#) (ISM) also commission their own reports into the health of the industry and specific issues. UK Music releases an annual economic report on the music industry, evidencing a record £8 Billion contribution to the UK economy in 2024.²

2. UK Music, This Is Music 2025, <https://www.ukmusic.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/This-Is-Music-2025.pdf>

League Tables

League tables and rankings such as the Guardian, the Times, QS World Ranking and the Complete University Guide continue to be used by senior management to both promote the university and assess the place of subjects in the wider higher education ecology.

It is important to understand the factors and weightings used by different rankings if presented with arguments around the place of your department in the league tables. For example, QS World Ranking uses the below weightings which may not be suitable for the department's or wider institution's priorities.

Table 1: QS World Ranking Weighting ³

| Lens | Weighting | Indicator | Weighting |
|--|-----------|---|-----------|
| Research and Discovery | 50% | Academic Reputation | 30% |
| | | Citations per Faculty | 20% |
| Employability and Outcomes | 20% | Employer Reputation | 15% |
| | | Employment Outcomes | 5% |
| Learning Experience | 10% | Faculty Student Ratio | 10% |
| Global Engagement | 15% | International Faculty Ratio | 5% |
| | | International Research Network | 5% |
| | | International Student Diversity | 0% |
| | | International Student Ratio | 5% |
| Sustainability | 5% | Sustainability | 5% |

3. QS Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), <https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings/methodology>

Financial Literacy and Business Planning

The financial management of a department requires confidence in financial literacy, understanding the income and outgoings and being able to adequately defend the decisions that have been made. Therefore, it may be beneficial to undertaking professional development in basic accounting.

The [BUFDG Guide to Understanding University Finance](#) offers a useful introduction to financial systems at universities in the UK. It can be helpful to engage with the associated organisations for professional services within the higher education sector as they can offer insights into the areas where decisions are made. These associations sit under [Professional HE Services](#) (PHES). For example, the [Association of Heads of University Administration](#) (AHUA) has a very active [blog](#) which discusses the issues facing executive boards and strategic planners in the HE industry.



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Effective influencing for your university music department requires a deliberate and targeted approach.

Understanding the motivations and pressures of your target audience means that you can tailor both how you deliver your message and what key information you need at your disposal, gaining support from those in positions of power within the university, and respected, influential stakeholders.



Senior Leadership

It is essential to understand how Vice Chancellors and executive boards think – particularly in terms of the pressures they face around student recruitment, reputation, impact and financial sustainability. Frame your arguments for music in ways that align with their priorities. This could include

reading university strategy documents and financial reports to help speak their language. Additionally, identify and build relationships with senior staff members who are already sympathetic to music in order to strengthen leadership and advocacy for music more broadly across the sector. This could include Vice Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors, Executive Deans, Chief Financial Officers or Chief Operating Officers. It is useful to research the backgrounds of those with decision-making responsibilities to ascertain if they have benefitted from music education themselves, as many senior leaders will have taken part in interviews and may have indicated a connection with music.

Senior leadership may need to be alerted by the valuable role music departments can play in the marketing of a university. The performative nature of the department, whether through concert posters, broadcasting, outreach or featured alumni, offers prime marketing material to capture the attention of key stakeholders, from prospective students to members of the public.

Retired senior management, such as Vice Chancellors, can be powerful advocates: they often retain credibility, extensive networks and a degree of independence that allows them to speak persuasively in support of music without institutional constraint. Therefore, build relationships with retired senior leaders who are known supporters of music.

Institutional Agendas

Universities are required to publish their own institutional policies and strategy in a public medium which offers useful insight into their priorities and measures. By aligning with and contributing to these institutional agendas, a department can demonstrate its value in satisfying the long-term goals. This could include:

- Global collaboration
- Widening participation
- Industry partnerships
- Commercial income generation
- Outreach
- Social corporate responsibility
- Equity, inclusion and diversity (EDI).

Spending time to understand the university's key performance indicators and strategic plan means that you can adjust your department to be seen as successful or useful for the perceived success of the wider university.

Alumni

Celebrate the success of students and alumni – across performance, education, industry, research and wider creative careers – to help counter ill-informed narratives about employability for music graduates. These stories should be systematically captured and used to market the outcomes of music study, in language that resonates with both senior

decision-makers and external audiences.

Many alumni departments feature graduates through blogs, newsletters, social media posts or interviews, and by proactively connecting the department with successful alumni, you can ensure that music graduates are visible, both to the executive board and to the public. Inviting alumni to speak at the department also offers the opportunity for self-promotion, whether as soloists, guest artists, composers in residence, speakers or researchers. It is also important to champion those who have achieved in fields outside of music, demonstrating the transferable skills afforded by music education.

Whilst alumni departments are responsible for communication with the wider graduate body, it may be beneficial for staff within the music department to proactively oversee the destinations of graduates, such as by making connections via LinkedIn. Due to GDPR, alumni departments often cannot share the contact details of graduates as they have not directly indicated that they consent to contact by the department, meaning that it may be necessary to establish a mechanism to collect student details and their permission for further contact while they are still enrolled at the university.



Market Position

It is important to consider where an institution is benchmarking itself by identifying what the comparator institutions are, what place music takes in its portfolio and geographical considerations. For example, if an institution is situating itself as being an industry-led and focused on employability, it is important to ensure that the department is contributing to this narrative. Market research is needed to establish how you differ to departments in the same geographical area and the cold spot that the closure or reduction of your department would leave.

Stakeholders

Beyond the university, identify and reach out to key stakeholders, including policymakers, funders, cultural organisations, employers and professional bodies. Public campaigning can play an important role in shaping wider perceptions of the value of music in higher education. Arguments can be grounded in

both quantitative evidence and more personal, human stories. Complement this by engaging proactively with the media, positioning your department and its key personnel as authoritative voices on music, creativity and education, to ensure that music is part of the broader public conversation about skills, culture and the future of universities.

Cross-Departmental Collaboration

In addition to working with stakeholders and external organisations, it can be highly beneficial to collaborate with other departments within the institution. This may be through sharing facilities, organising interdisciplinary events, cross-departmental research projects, exploring the opportunity for joint programmes with other arts and humanities subjects, offering modules which can be used across departments, such as music and literature, technology, history or translation.

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At a university, the music department is likely to be valued by the wider student body, and the extra-curricular offering may impact on more students than almost any other department...

Although a sports department will, of course, have value. This may not be fully appreciated or understood by the executive board, and clearly communicating this can enhance the perceived value of the department.



Play – No, it's Serious!

A creative degree differs vastly in terms of structure, assessment, and timetabling than the majority of subjects, and we cannot assume that this is known by those outside of

the department. When looking at the number of contact hours, music may seem hands-off, but it is important to ensure that parents, prospective students and the wider university are aware of the day-to-day life of a music student. This includes both timetabled and non-timetabled activities, such as:

- Lectures and Seminars
- Workshops and Masterclasses
- Assignment completion
- Reading
- Preparing for and attending auditions
- Instrumental/vocal lessons
- Language learning
- Analysing music or score study
- Practicing independently
- Composing independently
- Recording performances
- Editing recordings
- Arranging scores for ensembles
- Ensemble rehearsals, for both student-led and formal ensembles
- Concert organisation
- Orchestral management
- Attending concerts internally and externally
- Performing both within the university and the wider area
- Attending performances of your compositions
- Reviewing concerts
- Promoting your performances or compositions

Music and Wellbeing

There is ample published research which points to the value of music to health and wellbeing. From the medical benefits (such as instrumental playing and dexterity, singing and breathing, music and mood, music and memory, etc) to the social and educational benefits, music has a powerful role to play in supporting humans across their life span. A report, 'Assessing the Economic Impact of the Arts on Health and Healthcare Services in Wales' published in January 2026 identified that participation in arts programmes contributes £588 million in annual health and wellbeing benefits across Wales.⁴

Struggles with mental health are increasing within the student population, as shown in a research briefing undertaken by the Government in April 2025; 'The proportion students who disclosed a mental health condition to their university increased rapidly from under 1% in 2010/11 to 5.8% in 2022/23.'⁵ However, in anonymous studies, this percentage increases significantly, with a 2024 survey of 12,644 respondents from over 145 UK universities showing that 75% of respondents regularly worry about their mental health.⁶

According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), students identified factors such as moving away from home, developing a new social identity and workload pressures.⁷

Music can play a valuable role in creating a sense of belonging, identity and worth, as well as providing a focus outside of academic pressures. A study undertaken in 2015 of preclinical medical students showed that 'music-related activities were correlated with lower burnout'.⁸ A further study from 2025 introduced a Movin' and Groovin' for Wellness (MGW) programme for university students including drumming and dancing sessions, which resulted in significant reductions in stress scores and increased creativity.⁹



4. Centre for Health Economics and Medicines Evaluation (CHEME), Bangor University; and Research Centre for Arts and Wellbeing, Edge Hill University, <https://arts.wales/about-us/research/assessing-economic-impact-arts-on-health-and-healthcare-services-wales>

5. UK Parliament (House of Commons Library), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8593/CBP-8593.pdf>

6. Cibyl (part of Group GTI), https://cibyl.groupgti.com/hubfs/Student_Mental_Health_Research_2024.pdf

7. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), <https://cks.nice.org.uk/topics/mental-health-in-students/background-information/risk-factors/>

8. Fares J, Saadeddin Z, Al Tabosh H, Aridi H, El Mouhayyar C, Koleilat MK, Chaaya M, El Asmar K., 'Extracurricular activities associated with stress and burnout in preclinical medical students', J Epidemiol Glob Health. 2016 Sep; 6(3) :177-85.

9. Agres KR, Chen Y, 'The impact of performing arts on mental health, social connection, and creativity in university students: a Randomised Controlled Trial', BMC Public Health. 2025 May 2; 25(1): 16-28



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Whilst those of us within music know of its benefits, both as an academic subject and a form of enrichment, those in a decision-making capacity need to understand the value of music to the wider ecology of the university.

We need to be clear about music's wider contribution through less apparent means, such as industry partnerships and engagement with local citizens.



Music as Enrichment

For staff and students alike, music offers an opportunity for social connection and personal development, and can have a positive impact on wellbeing. Music has the ability to bring together students from other disciplines, and can provide a much-needed break from stresses arising through assessment, social pressures or academic expectations. For many, the familiarity of a rehearsal environment can ease the adjustment of moving away from home.

Enrichment is a double-edge sword for the music sector. It can be challenging to find a balance between demonstrating the impact of extra-curricular music and devaluing the department as solely a facilitator of additional opportunities. This means that a strong relationship between the teaching and administrative staff, and the extra-curricular offering is key. This can be done through:

Recording the music staff's involvement in extra-curricular activities

- Did the ensembles perform staff compositions?
- Did the staff lead workshops for the ensembles?
- Do staff members conduct ensembles?
- Does the programming interact with staff's research outputs?
- Do the ensembles contribute to students' portfolios?

- Did staff give pre-performance talks or contribute programme notes?
- Did administrative staff organise the auditions, rehearsals, sheet music, tours, rehearsal space bookings and concerts?

Evidencing music students' involvement in extra-departmental events

- Have students performed at university events, such as a string quartet or harp at dinners? Graduation? Carols at Christmas?

Keeping a record of non-music students and staff who use the department, such as practice rooms, studios etc.

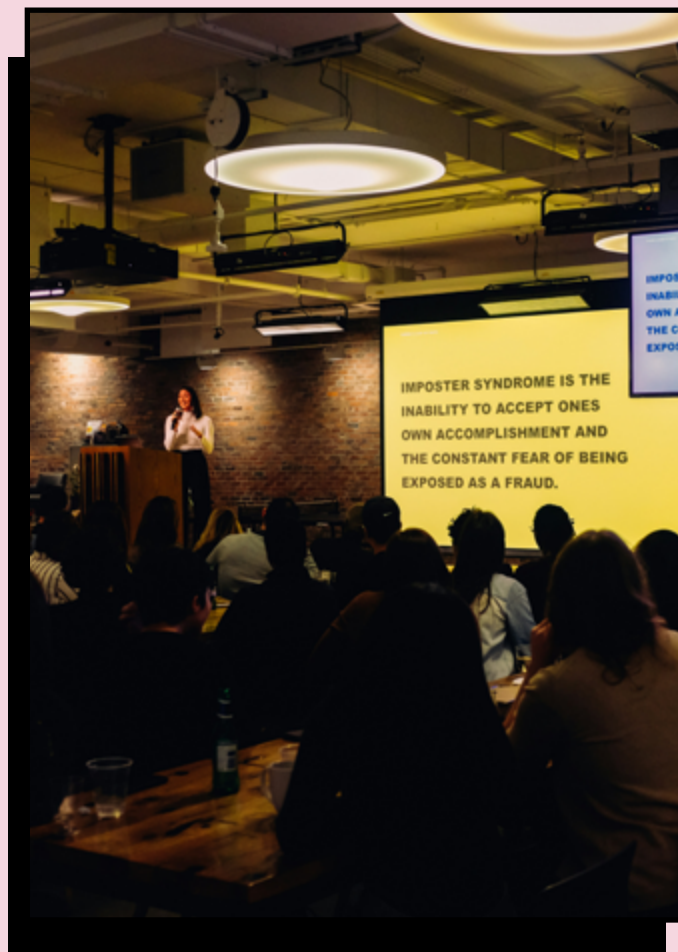
- Do staff members also sing in the choir?
- Do staff members and students attend concerts?
- Do they use the facilities for their own personal benefit?

Records of professional performances

- Do you have clear records of prestigious performers who have performed as part of your concert series?
- Do you have lists of professionals who have given masterclasses?

It is also important to emphasise the difference between student-led and professionally-led ensembles in terms of quality, quantity,

organisation and challenge. Student-led ensembles are vital in that they provide students with the autonomy to take ensembles in their own direction, develop their own organisational skills and create social spaces without staff present. However, music professionals are more skilled in supporting musical development, introduce new and complex music, have advanced knowledge to offer in terms of context and analysis, and offer an unbiased and regulated entry process. In turn, these ensembles act as a shop window for the university.



Non-Music Students

When looking at the most popular A-level subject combinations with music, it is interesting to see that it is often taken alongside mathematics and the sciences (See below).

Top six three-subject combinations for students who have taken Music in their Summer 2025 A level series (Ofqual)¹⁰

1. Music, Mathematics and Physics
2. Music, Mathematics and Further Mathematics
3. Music, Biology and Chemistry
4. Music, Chemistry and Further Mathematics
5. Music, Further Mathematics and Physics
6. Music, English Literature and History



Whilst a student may not choose to study music, this does not mean that they will lose all interest in a hobby that they may have been cultivating since a young age, and which likely contributed to their social life, wellbeing and friendships.

This means that the presence and health of a music department may significantly impact a student's decision to attend a particular university, regardless of whether they study music or not. The ideal concept of a student lifestyle also differs greatly between individuals, and social activities which are not centred around drinking or nightlife may appeal to international students or those from certain religious backgrounds.

Most ensembles, performances and events where music is a key element will involve more than just the students studying the subject. That enrichment is important and must be recognised and valued by the university as a whole. If there is no music department what other subjects will be affected by falling student numbers?

10. Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation), <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/SubjectCombinations/>

International Students

The increasing reliance on international students also calls into play the prominence of music performance overseas. Therefore, in order to attract international students, universities need to be able to demonstrate that they have a dynamic and active music offering, regardless of their course of study. This may include concert tickets, access to practice rooms, opportunities for performance, and instrumental/ vocal lessons.

As evidenced in recent years, overreliance on international partnerships from particular nations can result in financial instability and unpredictability due to the external influence of immigration policy and geopolitics. Therefore, whilst international student recruitment can offer increased fees and student numbers, it is unwise to rely upon income from specific universities or areas, and a portfolio approach provides more financial stability. It is also important to consider potential changes in international policy and use scenario modelling to assess the impact it would have on income, recruitment, staff-student ratios and other key metrics.



Civic Engagement and Culture

The nature of music departments mean that they are ideal sources of civic engagement, bridging the gap between the university and the local public. They contribute to the cultural landscape of a city, and the impact on smaller localities with fewer opportunities can be significant. Therefore, keeping up to date with the extent of your contribution to the local area can emphasise how the public benefits from

your existence. This could be concerts, partnerships with museums, heritage properties, art galleries, charities or performing at community events (such as carol concerts, turning on the Christmas lights or festivals).

Industry Partnerships

Given the continued focus on employability, industry partnerships both aid the department's reputation within the university and attract more students.

They can be formed with orchestras, choirs, chamber ensembles, community music ventures, venues, recording studios, record labels, schools or cultural organisations, and increase the department's visibility.



Research Reputation

Whilst research reputation may not be a priority for recruiting undergraduate students, the research profile of a department in terms of key outputs, impacts and funding can have a significant impact on its standing within the wider institution. This means that it is important to ensure that records are kept capturing all research activity, including:

- Journal articles
- Chapters
- Monographs
- Edited collections
- Reviews
- Funding applications
- Conference organisation
- Conference participation
- Keynotes/Guest speakers
- Doctoral research
- Compositional output
- Premieres
- Performances
- Research collaborations

It is also important to ensure that they are publicly celebrated through marketing channels, such as the departmental website, university news, blogs, newsletters and social media.



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A narrative that will be familiar to those working within music is the concern around employability, whether expressed by teachers, careers advisors, parents/carers or graduate outcome returns. Not only is this fixation unhelpful, but it is incorrect.



Engaging with the opportunities that music opens up for young people's future careers, whether in music or other sectors, can change perspectives around the value of music education, and illustrate the benefits of successful, visible alumni and transferable skills to senior management.



A Healthy Industry

UK Music's *This Is Music* report demonstrates that employment in the music industry is not only stable, but is growing. The 2025 report shows a record £8 billion contribution to the UK economy and £4.8 billion in exports. However, a lack of exposure to this industry often results in incorrect assumptions about its health. It may be useful to indicate the

scale of the music industry by highlighting the daily interactions most people have with music and the impact on people's lives.¹¹ Challenge your senior team to consciously notice their interactions with music for the rest of the day to see the role it plays in their life and its contribution to other industries.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Marketing | Played on adverts; theme songs/jingles; used on social media clips. |
| Retail | Played in supermarkets, shops, health and beauty establishments and convenience stores to influence customer behaviour. |
| Sport and Exercise | Played to motivate when exercising; played in gyms; played at sports fixtures; anthems for different teams. |
| Hospitality | Played in restaurants, pubs, cafes and bars to create atmosphere. |
| Special Events | Special songs for weddings, funerals or birthdays; live music; discos. |
| Leisure-Time Listening | Played for relaxation, mood-regulation or enjoyment; played whilst cooking or doing household chores. |
| Entertainment | Played at leisure venues, such as bowling alleys, theme parks or cinemas. |
| Education | Used to learn educational concepts, such as the alphabet or languages; used to aid study. |
| Health & Wellbeing | Music for relaxation; music therapy; played during medical procedures; played at doctors' surgeries. |
| Offices and Administration | Played in offices; hold music used to influence customers. |
| Hotels | Played in shared spaces in hotels. |
| Film and TV | Film soundtracks; TV theme songs; TV background music; trailers. |
| Video Games | Video game soundtracks; gaming competition. |
| Live Music | Attending concerts or theatre performances; live music on the street; performances during festive periods, e.g. carols at Christmas. |
| Transport | Radio or recordings played whilst driving or using public transport; played whilst walking. |

11. For scholarly evidence, see Chapter 17 'Music and Everyday Life' in Susan Hallam and Evangelos Himonides, *The Power of Music: An Exploration of the Evidence* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022), pp. 573-591.

Transferable Skills in a Changing World

We are all faced with the rapid speed of development in the world at present, and the resultant need for new skills, careers and training priorities. Sources predict that Gen-Z workers will have between five and seven careers in their lifetime, in addition to 'polyworking' (or portfolio careers), increasing the value of transferable skills.¹²



Kingston University surveyed over 2,000 businesses to gain insight into how they are adapting. According to the Future Skills Report 2025, '56 per cent of businesses are likely to consider a more skills-based approach as an optimal way to modify their hiring practices.'¹³ The report also identifies the top future skills, which can be directly mapped against features of music education:¹⁴

1. Problem Solving/Process Skills
2. Communication Skills
3. Digital Skills
4. Critical Thinking
5. Analytical Skills
6. Adaptability and Financial Literacy
7. Initiative, Resilience and Creativity

8. Ability to Build Relationships

This also gives further importance to the concept of creative industries, where workers stay within the creative field but move between disciplines and roles.

Employability

With record numbers of people out of employment in the UK, employability is being increasingly emphasised within higher education curricula. Therefore, it is imperative that you ensure that your programmes address all aspects of being in the music industry, including but not limited to:

- 'Polyworking' or 'portfolio' careers
- Business administration (self-employment tax, business registration, etc.)
- Self-promotion (social media, websites, networking, branding)
- Entrepreneurial skills
- Time management
- Wellbeing and safety in the music industry

Opportunities for work placements are strongly encouraged and can be facilitated through industry partnerships.

12. William Arruda, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamarruda/2024/11/05/why-polyworking-is-the-future-of-work-and-how-to-become-a-polyworker/>

13. Kingston University London, https://assets.kingston.ac.uk/m/32c8151479564c48/original/20250617_FutureSkills2025-report-1.pdf

14. Kingston University London, https://assets.kingston.ac.uk/m/32c8151479564c48/original/20250617_FutureSkills2025-report-1.pdf

Employability Officers & Careers Services

In addition to personal tutors or lecturers, students have access to employability officers and the careers service at your university. As these are often free and are available to all learners, it is important that you work with them to ensure that they are up to date when it comes to the music industry and the variety of careers on offer. This may not be limited to the music industry, such as education or conversion courses (such as law), and should be able to advise students on how to promote their transferable skills.

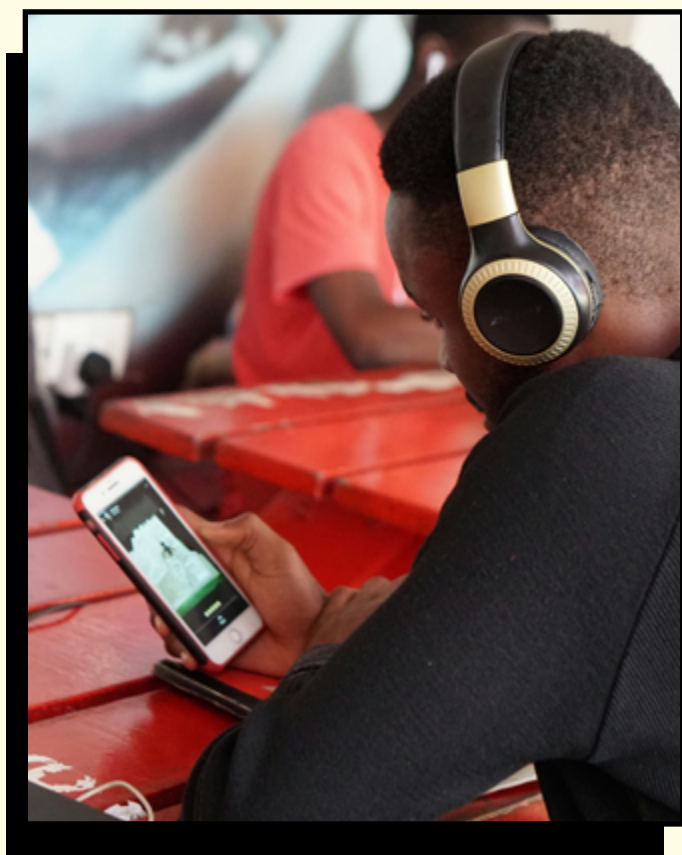


Marketing and Communications

Marketing holds greater value than simply being a mechanism to capture prospective students; it shapes the way the public perceive music as a subject and evidences its value and relevance. The creation of a marketing and communications strategy leads to an intentional and representative depiction of your department, which reaches key stakeholders through the most suitable medium and champions your achievements.

In the case of individual subjects, it is important to consider each of the different stakeholders that you are marketing to, such as:

- University senior management
- Local community
- Prospective students
- Prospective parents/carers
- Prospective staff members
- Teachers and educators in colleges and sixth forms
- Current staff members
- Current students who may continue to postgraduate level
- Alumni



A university music department might market their courses to prospective students include:

Testimonials

Are there students who would offer strong statements of support of the programmes currently on offer? Could a set of statements be pulled together into a 'press pack', either online or even printed, to be given to students at open days etc?

Alumni

Does the department have any celebrity alumni? Staff or students? How could they help advocate for the department? Make sure that you celebrate alumni achievements, both within the music industry and in other sectors. This means that it is important to maintain and nurture an alumni network.

Identify your USP

What 'treasure' do you have in your department? Every university is different and every department within that university is different – what is the unique selling point (USP) of your department? How do you distil that down into a simple statement with which to market your department to prospective students (their parents, educators etc)?

Different products, same market

There are a finite number of students who will want to study music in the UK. With that in mind, what are the different products – the courses, resources, staff – within your department which might attract students to your university?



Marketing outside of the 9-5

A music department in a university doesn't open at 9am for the first lecture of the day and close at 6pm when the final lecture has been given. People – beyond the students and staff – are connecting with the department through various other events and activities such as concerts, workshops, even the hiring out of spaces within the department to community groups etc. How can the

department 'sell' itself to these visitors and celebrate the wider engagement it has?

Music-specific marketing

In many departments or schools, marketing is undertaken by university-wide communications teams. It is important to work with the team, which could include providing a list of the events, rehearsals, workshops etc. that need to be attended and promoted.



Student marketing ambassadors

Current students are often astute when it comes to social media, marketing and capturing key moments. This means that they are often very capable of providing you with materials for your marketing, often at a sufficient quality for use online. Music societies formed by students are invaluable for showcasing the life and soul of the department, and they are entitled to their own social media output.

Providing mentoring or training in using social media could help the students to create an active and engaging online presence, whilst also giving them a real life opportunity to learn a key skill of increasing value in the industry.

This includes postgraduate taught and research students who are more likely to be contributing to external events, such as conferences or composition workshops. These could include photographs or short video clips from:

- Student-led ensembles
- Rehearsals
- Concerts (backstage and on-stage)
- Recitals
- Workshops
- Conference attendance/presentation
- Interviews with lecturers/instrumental & vocal tutors/peers/visiting performers/visiting lecturers

Embrace new technology

Universities are embracing new and developing technological opportunities for showcasing their facilities and offering, including virtual tours of buildings, 360-degree videos of concerts or events, podcasts to highlight staff research and student voice, and live-streaming events such as question-and-answer sessions, lectures or concerts.





Internal Marketing

One of the most valuable forms of marketing for a university department is the way that they celebrate their offering and achievements within the wider institution itself, as opposed to purely potential students.

This means that it is vital to form strong relationships with internal communications departments, ensuring that you inform them of key events or updates. This could include:

- Upcoming public events (concerts, workshops, etc.)
- Appearances in the media (BBC Radio 3, local news, etc.)
- Reports on previous public events
- Staff achievements (awards, publications, conferences, keynotes, appointments as trustees/learned societies, recordings, premieres, etc.)
- Alumni or student achievements Senior management within the university may not keep abreast of all the goings-on, but they will likely read newsletters to give the appearance of being informed about their staff and students.

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Internal Marketing

Whilst universities and conservatoires are independent organisations, governmental policies directly impact their inner workings through changes in fee structures, trends in industry support and immigration.



Here are some of the external influences to take into consideration when assessing the longevity of your programmes.

Skills Agenda

Alongside new policy comes commitment to finance, with priority sectors being most



generously funded. Therefore, it is highly beneficial to stay abreast of conversations around skills development. The National Foundation for Educational Research along with the Nuffield Trust funded a five-year project 'The Skills Imperative 2035' which identified the six skills it believes 'workers across the UK economy will need to thrive in their jobs in a technology dominated world':

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Information literacy
- Organising, planning and prioritising
- Problem solving and decision making
- Creative thinking¹⁵

Those of us in the music sector are aware of how each of these is serviced through musical education and training, yet this may not be apparent to those outside of the industry, meaning that it is useful to explicitly connect the dots.

15. Luke Bocoock, Michael Scott, and Jude Hillary, https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4lrdrml/skills_imperative_2035_final_report.pdf

Priority Sectors

In August 2025, the English Government undertook an 'Assessment of priority skills to 2030', identifying ten priority sectors to support their wider [Industrial Strategy](#) and [Plan for Change](#). According to the report:

The largest projections of additional employment between 2025 and 2030 are for the Creative Industries, Digital and Technologies, Housebuilding, and Clean Energy Industries sectors.

The Creative Industries sector is also the largest sector in terms of employment in 2025.¹⁶

Therefore, Creative Industries are identified as a priority sector and a [Creative Industries Sector Plan](#) has been created to address this, which highlights that 'in a world of synthetic material and AI-generated content, human endeavour and creativity will be more valuable than ever'. This governmental focus on the creative industries can result in funding opportunities, yet it can also reassure senior management that there is increased investment in the sector and significant opportunities for growth.

16. UK Government Department for Education (DfE), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-employer-representative-bodies/notice-of-designated-employer-representative-bodies>

Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP)

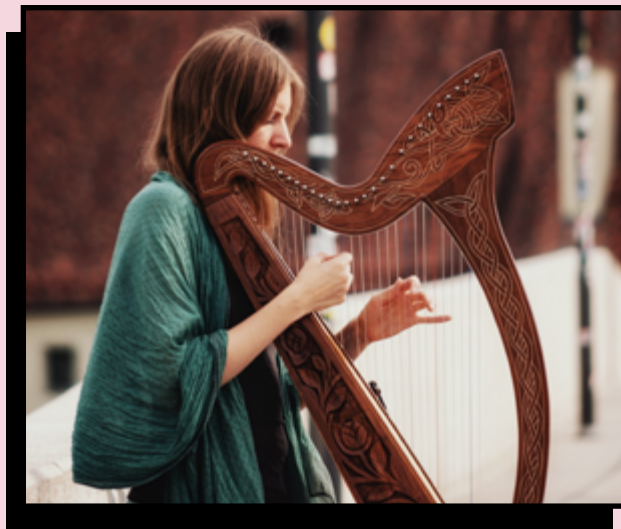
According to the Government website, '[Local Skills Improvement Plans \(LSIPs\)](#) unite employers, Strategic Authorities, higher education, further education and Independent

Training Providers and wider stakeholders in solving skills challenges together.'¹⁷ They are intended to encourage collaborative partnerships to develop the priority sectors in the area, such as Creative Industries, and allocate the Local Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF). Not only do LSIPs and reports highlight

collaborative opportunities and funding, but they also offer insightful data into the demographics, needs and opportunities in your local area.

The Department for Education has created a [Local Skills Dashboard](#), which provides figures and visuals regarding the employment rate, education and job adverts in your local area, including projected employment volume changes by industry, in accordance with the skills imperative 2035.

17. UK Government Department for Education (DfE), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030>



Government Post-16 White Paper

A Government [Post-16 white paper](#) released in October 2025 indicated a number of priorities for post-16 education, which will have notable impacts on curriculum, recruitment strategies and funding streams. The main aspects that should be taken into consideration from this report are discussed below.

University Mergers

The continual reference to 'collaboration' in the Post-16 Government White Paper (2025) suggests that there are likely to be further mergers to pool administrative resources and estates. In these circumstances, it is vital to ensure that the place of the music department, rather than simply the extra-curricular offering, are represented from the initial signs of discussion. This could mean working collaboratively with either the corresponding department at the merging university, or with other departments within your institution to see how you can safeguard your programmes. Proposing joint courses with well-established departments, such as computing and technology, or business studies, either within your current university or the resultant merged university, could ensure that you are able to continue your current offering, whilst expanding to work with subjects with a strong recruitment record. Similarly, mergers can also throw your physical resources into question, giving more weight to the need to continually monitor engagement with your spaces and specialist equipment, but also consider how

you can proactively suggest widening access, for example, working with film or media studies to give access to studio spaces, before they are taken from you.

In their report '[Towards a new era of collaboration](#)' (2025), Universities UK identified seven 'opportunities to support transformation and efficiency'.¹⁸

1. Pursuing innovative collaborative structures
2. Sharing more services and infrastructure
3. Leveraging sector buying power
4. Supporting digital transformation
5. Adopting a common approach to assessing efficiency and benchmarking costs
6. Developing leadership skills in those mandated to deliver change and further improving governance
7. Developing the current regulatory environment and supportive structures to help collaboration and transformation to go further, faster.

Although these changes would be the responsibility of senior management, their report provides clear recommendations in addition to examples from within the HE sector, and gives an insight into the decisions being made.

18. Universities UK (UUK) Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release>

Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE)

The Lifelong Learning Entitlement is an initiative recommended in the white paper to allow further flexibility within higher education and high-value technical awards. Replacing student loans, the scheme will allow learners to study standalone modules which can be accrued over time to contribute to larger programmes. However, it brings with a significant restructure of higher education and reconsideration of curriculum design. Applications for LLE will open in September 2026, with universities being expected to launch in January 2027. Whilst undergraduate music is not included in this modular offering at present, it will undoubtedly be subjected to structural changes to fit wider changes within the university system, meaning that it is important to begin consideration around how it could be amended.

Higher Education Organisations

A key aspect of managing external influences is being aware of potential changes as early as possible and reacting quickly. There are numerous organisations which offer reliable and useful information regarding higher education policy and external factors. We would recommend following the below:

- [WonkHE](#)
- [Arts and Humanities Alliance](#)
- [The British Academy](#)
- [Cultural Learning Alliance](#)
- [Advance HE](#)
- [The Higher Education Policy Institute \(HEPI\)](#)
- [Times Higher Education](#)
- [EdCentral](#)
- [UCAS](#)



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To ensure a university music department remains relevant, it is key that courses are regularly reviewed and updated to cater to student expectations.

A thorough understanding of the market and identification of underserved areas that you could potentially serve demonstrates that you are a pro-active, rather than reactive, department to executive boards.

Being innovative means being open to change, working with partners to ensure students are getting the best opportunities to learn and develop skills which will ensure they are ready for the workforce (in the music industry or beyond). Questions course leaders might ask regularly to reflect on the courses offered might include:

- What changes are happening within the music industry which might mean course content needs to be refined? Are we considering all sectors within the music industry (e.g. arts administration, education, performance, technology, music therapy, software)? Who can we ask to help us ensure we understand the jobs the sector can offer our students on graduation?

- Are there new skills students will need to acquire to enter the profession? Can we identify these and weave them into our courses?
- Do we need to add further modules focusing on employability, perhaps including work placements? Can we support students in creating their own businesses, or help them understand the requirements for portfolio careers?
- What about the transferable skills we teach? What skills are students gaining from our courses which could be useful regardless of the career path they chose? Have we thought about ways of engaging with NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training)?
- Are there partnerships we can make with industry – particularly local companies, museums, cultural charities, etc – which can enhance our course content?
- Are there partnerships we can make with other departments within the university, including joint modules, programmes or shared resources? Can cross-disciplinary collaborations make our programmes more appealing and unique?

- What agendas are we not considering but should be? This might include the ongoing conversation around Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and in particular, the access needs of current and future students, decolonisation of the curriculum, etc.



- Is there any market research we can undertake to better understand the wants and needs of prospective students?
- Are you innovative in your teaching methodology and assessment? Could you support a large-scale project involving students from different disciplines and pathways?
- With more students working alongside their studies, have you reconsidered the structure of your courses to enable those who work to access education? Could you allocate single days to teaching to allow for more flexibility?

- Do you have modules which would be of interest to those on joint degree pathways? Can a student study this without prior understanding of musical notation and terminology?
- Do our programmes consider the changing nature of pre-tertiary music education? Does it build on the knowledge and skills learners acquired prior to enrolment?
- Have we explored opportunities for postgraduate taught programmes to increase our student body and reputation? What specialisms could our staff bring to a postgraduate degree and how would it differ to other institutions?



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In order to ensure the longevity of music at higher education, it is vital to connect with student learning prior to their arrival at your department.

This involves engaging with the content of pre-18 music qualifications, providing opportunities for outreach and maintaining a high level of knowledge about the state of music education through the data and policy. A deeper level of understanding also leads to earlier identification to new areas for innovation, adapting to the new generation of prospective learners.

Outreach

As previously mentioned, universities have a civic duty to connect with other levels of education and are expected to have an outreach/learning and participation policy or strategy. By engaging with local schools or cultural organisations, you are contributing to the university's wider responsibilities and this can be viewed positively by executive boards. Additionally, outreach is a mutually exclusive tool that can benefit all parties involved:

- Teachers gain exposure to how music can be taught passionately.

- University students experience music teaching, potentially motivating them to consider a career in music education and helping with the recruitment crisis.
- Young people are given invaluable music-making experiences which may encourage them to continue their music education.
- Learners create a bond with the university and staff, increasing the likelihood that they would apply to your programmes.
- University staff reconnect with the foundational joy of music.

Whilst outreach may seem laborious and complex, Music Mark have created a Guide to Outreach aiming to simplify the process and provide higher education institutions with the foundational knowledge necessary to foster successful opportunities and relationships. Activities which can connect young learners to universities could include:

- GCSE/A-Level study days
- Open rehearsals
- Free performances
- Workshops
- Curriculum resources

School Curriculum

Although university curriculum may not directly build upon prior learning, changes in school curricula have an important bearing on the knowledge and skills that students bring when they enrol. Therefore, it is useful to have a foundational understanding of the areas which students may or may not have accessed before attending university, and to adjust your modules and assessment to suit their prior learning. The ability to demonstrate how students progress from compulsory and further education to your courses shows that your programmes are relevant, contemporary and pitched at the appropriate level, which reflects positively on the department. It is also important to understand that education is a devolved issue, meaning that England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have autonomy over their own curricula.

Entry Requirements

It is important to take into account the changes in landscape in music education when deciding upon entry requirements for undergraduate students as young people are not always able to access formal music education, or tuition which may result in performance grades. Whilst the recognition of music as a vital part of secondary education is improving and curricula are increasingly focusing on music, this will take time to filter through the system. A survey of GCSE and A-Level music across the UK not only shows that it is often not available for students to study, but its availability relies heavily on the locality, often in parallel with levels of

economic deprivation.

For example, in 2025, seven neighbourhoods in Blackpool rank amongst the top 10 most deprived in England according to the IMD25.¹⁹ as of writing in 2026, in Blackpool, only three of eight secondary schools offer GCSE music, with two of the schools being faith schools (Catholic and Church of England). There are also no sixth form or colleges offering A-level music, with only one offering any Level 3 music qualifications (Edexcel L3 Music Technology A-level, BTEC L3 Music and BTEC L3 Musical Theatre). In comparison, all eleven secondary schools in the wealthiest constituency in England, Richmond Upon Thames, offer GCSE Music.

With the crisis in teacher recruitment and falling numbers of pupils electing to take music, many schools and colleges are turning to alternative qualifications besides GCSE and A-Level music. These are accredited by a variety of awarding bodies, such as Pearson, Cambridge OCR and Rock School London, with each having their own curriculum and assessment requirements. This means that the experiences of students enrolling on undergraduate courses are likely to be both diverse and distinct, often specialising in particular genres of music, such as Musical Theatre, Popular Music or Western Classical Music.

¹⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025-statistical-release-A>

There has also been a significant increase in students taking discipline-specific qualifications, such as Music Industry, Music Technology, Performing Arts and Performance, at GCSE/A-Level age, resulting in skillsets which may not include advanced notation or analysis. Some universities are adjusting to this by creating foundation courses (from a summer school to a full year) to bring all students to a similar level of education before beginning their undergraduate studies. Alternatively, universities are also offering core modules to those who need to improve certain skills before being confidently able to access degree level.



ensure that your programmes of study are up-to-date and relevant. One simple way of achieving this is to sign up to email notifications from the Department for Education (England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland) and specify that you would like to be kept informed with issues of education, the arts and the humanities.

It can also be useful to sign up to reputable websites or news organisations to receive summaries or newsletters which provide insights or summaries of important developments. Examples of this are:

- [Music Mark](#)
- [The Musicians' Union](#)
- [Music Teachers' Association](#)
- [The Independent Society of Musicians](#)
- [Royal Musical Association](#)
- [The Society for Music Analysis](#)
- [International Society of Music Education](#)
- [Conservatoires UK](#)
- [UK Music](#)
- [Youth Music](#)



Engaging with Educational Policy and Developments

Given that higher education students are often directly progressing from pre-tertiary education, it is vital to understand the current issues of educational policy in music. This means that keeping abreast of the governmental announcements, white papers, consultations and changes to curriculum can



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