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Conservatoire alumni as mentors in instrumental music teacher education: a preliminary study

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that conservatoires in England have a responsibility to train music educators. This article proposes that alumni could have an important role to play in contributing to their former institution's instrumental music teacher education provision and explores how two UK conservatoire graduates with at least three years teaching experience mentored students on placements in professional teaching contexts. Through online semi-structured interviews, the two alumni reflected on their own mentoring styles, the benefits and challenges of mentoring, their prior experience of being mentored on placement as former students, and the perceived benefits of reciprocal learning through mentorship. Findings suggest that alumni believe they can offer valuable insights into early instrumental teaching careers. Though long-established teachers are often chosen to be mentors, arguably, alumni are more relatable as workplace role models for current students. Furthermore, it is proposed that mentor schemes offered in conjunction with employers enable conservatoires to continue to support instrumental teacher development long after their students have graduated, since reciprocal learning processes lead mentors to reflect on their own practice, deepening their pedagogical knowledge and metacognitive awareness.

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Conservatoire; instrumental teacher education; instrumental teacher training; alumni as mentors; mentoring in music education; music education workforce

Introduction

This article focuses on a preliminary study undertaken as part of the author's doctoral research, where two alumni reflected on their experiences of mentoring final-year undergraduate students during external work placements that formed part of students' instrumental teacher education at a conservatoire in England.

Conservatoires in the UK train musicians to exceptionally high levels with a focus on performance or other principal study disciplines, but they also have a responsibility to prepare their undergraduate students to work as music educators. According to a Review of Music Education in England commissioned by the government over a decade ago (Henley, 2011): 'Conservatoires should be recognised as playing a greater part in the development of a performance-led music education workforce of the future' (p. 26).

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

In England, instrumental teachers emerging from conservatoires are likely to be required to deliver workshops and/or Whole Class Ensemble Teaching (WCET), alongside small group tuition, directing ensembles and teaching one-to-one lessons. However, there is limited training available to instrumental teachers to support them in undertaking demanding and diverse roles such as these. In stark contrast, Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes enable classroom teacher trainees to work towards Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and to meet the Teachers' Standards (DfE Department for Education, 2011).

Recent research (Shaw, 2021a) suggests that whilst provision for instrumental teacher education has increased across the conservatoire sector over the past decade, the offer varies considerably from institution to institution. Even though conservatoires have been encouraged to move away from traditional pedagogical practices in recent years and to 'integrate creative activities such as improvising, arranging and composing' into their general curricula (Peters, 2014, p. 171), conservatoire academics have expressed concern that colleagues are not always completely up to date with their pedagogical practices, nor passionate about developing students' teaching skills. In Shaw's study (Shaw, 2021a), many employers argued that conservatoire graduates are frequently ill-prepared for the reality of the instrumental teaching profession. This may be due in part to much pedagogical training in conservatoires being taught in house with only a few institutions partnering with employers to offer external teaching placements. This is concerning given that the recently refreshed National Plan for Music Education implies that Higher Education Music Institutions (HEMIs) have an important role to play in preparing the next generation of music educators:

> To ensure they are best equipped to support children and young people [. . .] teachers and practitioners should consider how they can build their skills and connect with each other, and the wider music education ecology. This could include considering how they might connect with their local schools. (DfE and DDCMS, 2022, p. 66)

Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes in England include Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses, School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programmes or other year-long intensive training routes, but few courses allow teachers to spend time honing their instrumental teaching skills alongside their classroom practice. Consequently, ITT courses often lack appeal for conservatoire graduates who seem reluctant to take a year out from developing their burgeoning portfolio careers to be trained intensively in a classroom environment. Arguably, however, conservatoire graduates could benefit from belonging to a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) similar to that of students following ITT programmes, who have ready access to support from multiple experts from the music education field, not least a professional mentor (Allen & Toplis, 2019).

In music education, the mentoring literature encompasses areas such as doctoral studies (Froehlich, 2012; Westerlund, 2013), Initial Teacher Training (Cain, 2007) and the mentoring of school-aged children by professional musicians (Berryman, 2016). The UK conservatoire sector affords opportunities for students with differing backgrounds, musical specialisms and career aspirations to learn from and support one another (Jackson & Price, 2019) through 'hidden cross-year mentoring', discovered as a result of 'intersections of activities across and within programmes and departments' (p. 100).

Peer mentoring is also undertaken by staff in conservatoires: in one institution, established professional instrumental teachers, specialising in training the performers of the future, were encouraged to teach each other's students and then reflect together on that experience (Creech & Gaunt, 2012).

A key outcome of research undertaken by Shaw (2021b) was that conservatoire alumni were keen to use insights gained during their early careers to advise and influence current students who aspire to teach. Indeed, as early-career instrumental teachers, alumni can ensure that current students (and their tutors) are kept informed about the very latest developments in music pedagogy, directly from their work in the field. According to Sturrock (2007), 'Alumni are the link between conservatoires and the outside world. As practising professional musicians in their own right, they keep us alert to ongoing developments in the profession' (p. 9).

In recent years, many universities have developed alumni-led mentoring schemes to enhance students' employability skills. According to Burland et al. (2023), alumni have much to offer as mentors in HEMIs since mentees can be 'inspired by their mentor's passion for their work' and 'the insights afforded by direct contact with a particular profession', providing, 'a form of career preview' (p. 32). This is pertinent because Clark et al. (2015) report a perceived mismatch between the skills employers say they require and those usually inculcated by degree schemes. Clark's finding correlates directly with Shaw (2021a), where employers across England similarly perceived a mismatch between conservatoire students' pedagogical training and employer expectations for their graduate-level instrumental teachers. Despite this lack of congruence, research that investigates the role of mentoring in instrumental music teacher education in HEMIs in England is scarce.

According to Haddon (2009), HEMIs could provide opportunities for students to discuss their teaching and enable learning through mentoring partnerships with more experienced teachers. 'Partnerships' (p. 57) is the key word here, since top-down approaches to mentoring that are based on the transference of experience and expertise have been criticised due to the potential power relations involved. For example, according to Renwick and Reeve (2012), 'the greater the perceived difference in status, expertise or social power that exists between any two people interacting, the greater the likelihood that the higher status person (master) will relate to the lower status person (apprentice) in a controlling way' (p. 156). Brouwer et al. (2017) agree with this stance, recommending that mentoring should be heterarchical and collaborative in nature, as opposed to hierarchical: 'Formal leadership titles are not a prerequisite to be[ing] a successful mentor' (p. 34). Starr (2011) recommends that individuals can be influenced in non-controlling ways through simple, clear questioning designed to unlock information via a sensitive 'scaffolded' approach (Wood et al., 1976). Indeed, according to Hobson (2017), mentoring can be detrimental to teacher development where evaluations are undertaken in a judgemental manner that lacks awareness of the needs and vulnerabilities of early-career teachers.

Conversely, it has been argued that non-judgemental peer mentoring can benefit not only the mentees but also the mentors themselves (Amaral & Vala, 2009). Gallo (2021) agrees with this stance: 'Mentorship [. . .] offers advantages for both mentee and mentor. When a mentor approaches the experience with a growth mindset, it's a learning experience for them too' (p. 76). Similarly, Coppola et al. (2021) propose

a bidirectional approach whereby mentor and mentee take turns to advise and inform one another. In the context of mentoring practitioners in the performing arts, Renshaw (2009) also advocates a 'co-mentoring' model, which 'moves away from the traditional relationship of mentor (teacher) and mentee (learner) to become an equal exchange between two practitioners' (p. 51).

Renshaw (2009) further explains that through mentoring, practitioners can be supported to 'shift their perspective' through 'reflection-on action' and 'reflection-in-action' (p. 98), terminology originally introduced by Schön (1983). These terms are neatly summarised in the ITT literature by Fautley and Savage (2008): 'Reflection-in-action is what takes place when you reflect on what you are doing *as you are doing it*, whereas reflection-on-action is reflection which you undertake once the event has taken place' (p. 155). A reflective model initially proposed for the teaching profession by Borton (1970), and subsequently developed for clinical contexts by Driscoll (2000) and Rolfe et al. (2001), promotes similar aims whereby the questions 'What?', 'So what?' and 'Now what?' relate respectively to reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

The above discussion suggests that there is a paucity of literature documenting alumni-led mentoring approaches in instrumental teacher education. It is conceivable, however, that where conservatoire alumni and current conservatoire students are brought together to reflect on their teaching practices, the resultant reciprocal learning opportunities could inform the continuing professional development of both parties. As Shulman (1986) argues, a professional should be 'capable not only of practising and understanding his or her craft, but of communicating the reasons for professional decisions and actions to others', thus developing 'metacognitive awareness' (p. 13).

Indeed, given the challenges of transitioning from a higher education music course into the music profession, Creech, et al., 2008 suggest that mentoring and peer networks can continue to be beneficial after graduation. This is pertinent, given that lecturers may not fully understand how a soon-to-be graduate might be feeling upon entry to the modern instrumental teaching profession, whilst alumni, who have recently experienced a similar transition to their mentees, potentially have more capacity to empathise with their basic needs and insecurities as new teachers (McCann, 2011). Furthermore, mentoring undertaken by alumni may help to alleviate teacher anxiety in students and recent graduates, who are evidently aware of Impostor Phenomenon (Sims & Cassidy, 2020) according to research undertaken by Shaw (2021a).

Materials and methods

In 2011, the UK conservatoire featured in the current study began to formalise and strengthen existing links with local music education providers to create external placements for students as part of their pedagogical training. Local employers recognised the potential benefits in terms of future recruitment and professional development opportunities for employees who would be involved in mentoring students. Prior to taking on responsibility for supervising students on placement, mentors would attend an induction meeting designed to familiarise them with module aims and learning outcomes, and their role in modelling good practice for students. Their role would entail supporting the student to learn to teach through observation and experimentation in a safe learning environment where any mistakes signified opportunities for development, and where

reflective conversations between mentor and mentee were deemed important in order to facilitate ongoing professional development for their mutual benefit. On successful completion of their placements, many trainees were subsequently employed by their placement providers, with some even being invited to mentor students on placement a few years after graduating.

The aim of this preliminary qualitative study, undertaken as part of the author's doctoral research into their own pedagogical practice at their institution, was to explore the lived experiences of conservatoire alumni as mentors in instrumental teacher education. Despite a very small sample size and just two participants, it was hoped that the preliminary study would form an important contribution to future research by providing an indication of the value that can be derived from mentor-mentee relationships in instrumental teaching contexts.

It was important that participants had gained experience of mentoring current students in the workplace since graduating: therefore the alumni were selected through theoretical sampling (Denscombe, 2014). Following ethical approval via the relevant institutional committee and in accordance with the BERA guidelines (2018), informed consent was sought from and granted by both participants on the understanding that their anonymity would be preserved throughout the data collection, analysis and subsequent reporting stages. Semi-structured interviews were deemed an appropriate data collection method, since these offered flexibility to adjust and develop lines of enquiry if necessary (Denscombe, 2014). The interviews were conducted online: therefore owing to institutional recommendations around security, the decision was made to utilise the platform Microsoft Teams. Participant permission was given for recording the interviews for transcription purposes, providing that recordings were made on an encrypted, password-protected device rather than in the Teams app itself. The time taken to transcribe the interviews manually from the audio recording proved to be advantageous, enabling close engagement with the data.

Since the two alumni had previously studied pedagogy modules taught by the researcher, care was taken during the online interviews to avoid asking questions that brought prior knowledge of the participants into the interview, though it would be impossible to ascertain whether participants may have been subliminally aware of power dynamics (Cohen et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is possible that the Hawthorne effect (where participants may behave or respond differently from normal as a result of their opinions being placed under scrutiny) may have come into play (Denscombe, 2014). Consequently, the alumni (who will henceforth be identified as Mentors 1 and 2 via the alphanumeric codes M1 and M2 respectively) were given the freedom to lead the discussion wherever appropriate. However, to retain some parity of content, certain parameters were retained via a list of questions common to both interviews. It was crucial to consider the order of questions, since 'early questions set the tone or the mindset of the respondent to later questions' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 492). Thus, the aim was to allow participants to settle into the interview by reflecting on their overall experience and influence before summarising the benefits of mentoring for their own professional development. The interviews utilised the following questions:

- *How did you feel when asked to take on a mentoring role for the first time?*
- *Describe your relationship with your student-mentees in the workplace.*

- *How would you describe your mentoring style?*
- *How has your mentoring style developed over time?*
- *What do you hope your student-mentees have learned from you?*
- *Overall, what have you learnt from being a mentor?*

Thematic analysis was undertaken manually to facilitate close familiarity with the data. Following multiple initial read throughs on screen, the process involved printing off six A4 double-spaced pages of transcribed text per participant, reading through these line-by-line to identify segments of text that were distinctive from one another, and annotating them to enable a direct comparison of both mentors' perspectives. Initially, multiple 'codes' were applied to the text segments but, subsequently, overlapping codes were eliminated or combined to create overarching themes in line with recommendations by Creswell (2012). The transcripts were worked on multiple times in rotation since 'living with the data' and revisiting it over time can be beneficial in enabling the researcher to 'see [. . .] pattern[s] [they] have not seen before' (Grbich, 2013, p. 53). The emerging overarching themes: 'rite of passage', 'mentoring and being mentored' and 'reciprocal learning' discussed below incorporate important subsidiary themes such as 'impostor feelings' and 'hindsight'.

Findings and discussion

At the time of the interviews (July 2020), the first graduate participant (M1) had been working as an instrumental teacher in schools for three years, since graduating in 2017. M1 had been asked by their employer to act as a mentor for the first time in November 2019. The second graduate (M2) had also worked as an instrumental teacher in schools after graduating from a BMus course in 2014, later completing a postgraduate course in 2017. During 2014–20, M2 had mentored conservatoire students in a range of instrumental teaching scenarios.

Rite of passage

When asked how they had reacted to the invitation to mentor a current conservatoire student for the first time, both participants reported feeling inwardly proud to have been selected for the role. As suggested by Gallo (2021, p. 76) 'there is an element of gravitas in taking on a formal role as an alumni mentor. It's an endorsement from our alma mater.' At the same time, both participants disclosed feelings associated with Impostor Phenomenon (Sims & Cassidy, 2020). For example, M1 questioned whether their level of experience at the time was sufficient: *'I had it in my head that [only] really experienced people would do it, so I [. . .] panicked, [thinking] I don't really know what I can offer but I'm up for it.'* Similarly, M2 reported a dip in confidence when invited to take on a mentoring role for the first time, feeling simultaneously that it was *'really nice to be asked to give back to the whole process'* and uncertain they were ready: *'It was a double-edged thing. I felt like it was a rite of passage moment—excited [. . .] but also a little bit apprehensive.'*

At the same time, however, M1 proposed that bringing their own relatively recent experiences as a graduate-level instrumental teacher to the mentoring situation might

still prove beneficial: *'It feels like I'm still trying to find my way a little bit, [but] I think it is useful to be able to share that.'* Despite their limited self-belief, engaging in instrumental teaching placements themselves as former conservatoire students and further developing their pedagogical knowledge through their subsequent employment had evidently led to recognition from their employers who had placed their trust in them as mentors.

Mentoring and being mentored

As noted, participants were invited to discuss their mentoring style, how this had been developed, and any influences that may have informed their approach. It was clear that the approach of M2 to mentoring varied according to the situation and the student they were working with, and that they had been much influenced by approaches used by tutors and mentors during their own conservatoire training. Initially, M2 reflected on the interpersonal perspective, evidently understanding the need to be empathetic to students' needs (McCann, 2011): *'From my personal experience, I tend to [understand] more if I feel [. . .] it's a friendly relationship. So, I've probably imprinted that in the way I approach my own [mentoring] practice.'* From a pedagogical standpoint, M2 recalled that their own prior learning as a former student and mentee had been scaffolded (Wood, et al., 1976), whilst being largely student-led: *'we would be informed of certain things [and] given the opportunity to explore them independently, and then feedback was an open thing and tended to be led by us.'* Learning from this prior experience, M2 appeared to adopt a co-mentoring approach (Renshaw, 2009):

> When it comes to reviewing and improving, individuals tend to retain information more effectively if it comes from them [. . .] rather than being told 'this is how you do it'. I encourage [mentees] to question my practice and why I [do] things a certain way [. . .]. More often than not, I'll give them a personal example from my own experience and then let them try it [. . .] independently and then [ask] them to lead on reflecting. I'll ask leading questions such as, 'How did you find that? Can you tell me some things that were really successful? Are there any areas you found challenging and if so, why? (M2).

This approach is also reminiscent of recommendations by Starr (2011), who claims that simple, clear questions can unlock information, influencing individuals to move forward positively without being controlling. In short, M2 believed that to gain the most from the mentoring process and achieve a positive outcome, mentees would be encouraged to critique their own practice and that of others, *but 'not in a detrimental way.'* By and large, the approach of M2 involved discussing the areas in which mentees felt confident, raising their awareness of aspects of practice that mentees '*needed to address in a slightly different way*', and finally, *'work[ing] together to address how they are going to move on from that point and progress'* (M2).

An initial challenge met by M1 was that at the start of a placement completed across November—December 2019, where their mentee was required to observe prior to doing some teaching themselves, their mentee's late arrival left no time for any preparatory discussion. While M1 took responsibility for their oversight in not scheduling a telephone conversation with their mentee to explain the context for the placement in advance, they suggested that the situation reflected the reality of '*being thrown in at the deep end*' when starting out as an instrumental teacher. In reflecting on their own

experience as a new graduate employee, M1 reported negligible training and little time for consolidation or reflection before teaching began. Even so, M1 appeared to acknowledge their own indifference as a former student, and in hindsight, regretted not having taken full advantage of the external placement opportunities offered by the conservatoire and local schools. Moreover, M1 admitted to *'feeling quite nervous'* about taking up some of these opportunities at the time:

> There was a whole class instrumental [teacher] training scheme at college, but I didn't do it. In college, I saw pedagogy as something I needed to do, but I didn't really feel enthusiastic about it. But [now] I'm [interested in] how the kids learn [and] keen for them to progress the best they can [. . .]. In college, I would probably have been thinking [that] standing in front of a group of 30 primary school children [wasn't for me]. But actually, most of my work [is] in primary schools now [and] I enjoy [it] a lot more than I thought I would. It's about taking the opportunities you get, isn't it? And not writing things off until you've given things a bit of a go.

In sharing their own approaches to mentoring a conservatoire student, both alumni discussed a blend of modelling, experimentation and discussion. It was clear that M1 had been influenced by the mentor they had worked alongside whilst a student, as well as the challenges they had themselves experienced as an early career instrumental teacher. A need to reconcile the 'deep end' element via an empathetic approach, along with a desire to scaffold the student's learning emerges from the following reflection:

> I let [my mentee] watch [my teaching] first [. . .]. I'd [demonstrate] the warm-up steps I'd go through with a whole class, [let them] do a [further] observation in another school and then [let them] lead the warm-up [there]. They wouldn't have met the kids before [so] that would be the deep end element [. . .]. I was tempted to control the situation, but I just let [them] go ahead and see what happened, even if I didn't think it was going to work. Then, if something didn't go quite as they thought it was going to go, [I would] then make a little suggestion [to] take on board (M1).

The approach of M1 appeared instinctive and honest, stating that the aim was not to make their teaching seem easy or *'look good'*, but instead to ensure that their mentee *'was getting a realistic portrayal of how things were'*, including the challenges involved and how to overcome them: *'I just wanted to make sure that I mentioned all the things I [used to find] tricky and that [the mentee] got a chance to [experience] them.'* In justifying this approach, M1 referred repeatedly to the challenges they themselves had faced as a new instrumental teacher, emphasising lesson planning and behaviour management in particular, thus resonating with the views of conservatoire alumni in a study by Shaw (2021b). M1 also encouraged their mentee to formulate their own thoughts about certain teaching strategies or situations before discussing the rationale and context surrounding them, and proposing solutions, akin to the 'What? So What? Now What?' approach to reflection discussed above.

Looking back on their former student experience as a mentee, M1 believed that what they really needed from their mentor was *'just a little bit of a head start rather than flying down the road'*. In other words, even though M1 had perceived their own mentored experience to be '*very valuable*', they also felt unsure about the usefulness of so much of the '*complicated*' information they had received at that time. Instead, they sensed that their highly experienced mentor *'took certain things for granted'* and did not break down concepts sufficiently for a new teacher to take on board and implement successfully.

Moreover, whilst M1 indicated that observing *'someone who's got it sorted'* and seeing *'what teaching would look like if you were doing it really well'* was constructive, they asserted that learning about the challenges involved in *'getting up and running'* as a new teacher would have been more relevant to their final-year teaching placement. As M1 explained, as a graduate employee, *'there were [still] lots of things I didn't really expect'*, so they would have preferred their own mentor to consider, explain and demonstrate *'the basic things'* more thoroughly.

Consequently, having perceived a weakness in their former mentor's approach, M1 appeared to resolve to be more effective in their own mentoring role, by giving their mentee *'a key arsenal of stuff that they could use'* as a new teacher. This would include, for example, tips for *'planning quickly [yet] thoroughly'*, what to do *'when kids get distracted'*, and practical resources for whole class instrumental lessons. M1 was also keen to ensure that mentees were made aware of *'the first things that are going to come up and some of the ways they could be managed'*. Through these recommendations, M1 demonstrated several of the positive attributes needed for successful mentoring, as described by McCann (2011), such as being empathetic and respectful, collaborative and willing to help others in ways that are supportive to their needs.

Reciprocal learning

Both alumni reported ways in which mentoring conservatoire students in music education settings had impacted on their own developing professional practice, reflecting a growth mindset alluded to by Gallo (2021) earlier in this paper. For example, M1 suggested that the presenting and sharing processes involved in mentoring *'add[ed] another level of thinking'* to their practice, while M2 reported that mentoring had led them to *'think more critically'* and be *'a bit more mindful'* than they normally would be. Both alumni reported that whilst being observed by their mentees, their own communication skills had improved due to the need to *'break down processes, thoughts and strategies'* in ways that could be easily understood by pupils and later applied in their mentees' teaching. Moreover, opportunities for reciprocal learning, including receiving feedback from mentees, appeared to be highly valued. In this case, it is clear that the mentor (M2) benefited from collaborative dialogue in equal measure to the student, again reflecting Renshaw's co-mentoring approach (Renshaw, 2009):

> It's a two-sided thing. I'm always learning [. . .] because I will lead an activity and then watch [the] student lead their[s]. Sometimes things don't work and it's always really interesting to talk together about why. [We] try to piece together what's happening and why a certain delivery has resulted in a certain behaviour [. . .]. Sometimes [my mentee] would ask me questions about things I didn't even realise I was doing [. . .] – a different way of thinking that hadn't occurred to me previously [. . .]. I think one of the most joyful things for me is that even though [I'm] in a mentor role and I'm no longer in formal education, I feel I can constantly be developing my practice through working with other people who are still building theirs (M2).

While one of the aims of the teaching placement was that conservatoire students learned through observing their mentor's teaching, it was evident that M1 had also benefited from the mentoring process in developing confidence, self-awareness and self-belief. Whilst acknowledging that their own teaching skills might appear limited when

compared to senior colleagues, M1 divulged that their own approach to facilitating learning had developed significantly since graduating. Indeed, observing their relatively inexperienced mentee in front of classes had led M1 to realise the impact that teacher confidence, or lack thereof, could have on young instrumental music learners:

> When I was explaining things to [my mentee], I had all of this information that I definitely couldn't have known [when I was] in the same position as them. So, [it was] a confidence boost [. . .]. If I'm feeling awkward, I'm not going to do that good a job because the pupil will also feel awkward. It's worth being confident with what I know because that helps me to be myself and build a better rapport with pupils [. . .]. That's a lot more engaging than [feeling] uncomfortable because I've not got as much experience [as senior colleagues].

It was also suggested by M1 that mentoring was important for their professional development because they did not *'tend to see or interact that much with people on a similar level'* at work, and opportunities to share their early teaching experiences with other new teachers were few and far between.

Conclusions and implications

The findings discussed in this paper suggest that alumni with instrumental teaching experience could be relatable role models for current conservatoire students in instrumental teacher education. It is possible that, as a result of their own recent experiences, alumni may be more empathetic and aware of students' needs and vulnerabilities as emerging instrumental teachers than long-established music educators. Alumni could also help promote the benefits for students of taking full advantage of training opportunities that will support them to begin their teaching careers with confidence. This would be particularly helpful in cases where students feel inhibited or lack confidence, or where they fail to understand the relevance of taking up such opportunities.

Moreover, as working music educators who, according to participant M1, tend to operate in isolation, alumni stand to benefit from participating in symbiotic partnerships that have the capacity to lead them to reflect on their practice in new ways, deepening their 'metacognitive awareness' (Shulman, 1986, p. 13). Importantly, mentoring initiatives provide a means, not only of supporting students' transition into the instrumental teaching profession, but also of extending professional development opportunities to alumni.

Evidently, as a preliminary study, the current research has significant limitations, not least in involving only two participants. Whilst there is validity in the research, it is not reliable in that the results would likely vary if the project was undertaken on a larger scale. Future research could include a longitudinal study involving both mentors and their mentees to provide more balanced overall perspectives. Furthermore, a much larger sample, possibly involving multiple institutions and employers, could provide a wide range of insights, raising current conservatoire staff and students' awareness of career challenges and possibilities across a wider geographical area and/or range of settings.

There is scope to learn from alumni-led mentoring models offered by many UK universities where emerging professionals are supported across a broad spectrum of careers (Burland et al., 2023). Given the limited training available for instrumental teachers, employers and conservatoires could collaborate to offer

mentoring programmes that benefit both student-mentees and alumni-mentors, enabling them to learn from each other. However, given the quality assurance implications, it would be important to ensure that mentors were selected by their employer on the basis of an excellent track record as an instrumental teacher. Clear line management for mentors would also be important, as would training in relation to professional protocols and responsibilities. Ideally, it would be important to ensure that mentees were immersed in environments that reflected up-to-date practices with direct relevance for their early teaching careers, extending students' pedagogical knowledge. Therefore, ongoing dialogue and monitoring of provision between institutions and employers would be essential.

If managed carefully, more widespread initiatives involving alumni music educators in mentoring current conservatoire students in instrumental teaching contexts could benefit conservatoire staff, students, alumni and the ongoing development of the music education workforce. Indeed, such initiatives would also align closely with the recent government recommendations outlined near the beginning of this paper:

> To ensure they are best equipped to support children and young people [. . .] teachers and practitioners should consider how they can build their skills and connect with each other, and the wider music education ecology. (DfE and DDCMS, 2022, p. 66)

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Luan Shaw is Associate Professor: Director of Postgraduate Studies at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) and has practised as a performer and instrumental teacher for over 30 years. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and was made an Honorary Member of RBC in 2001. In her former role as RBC's first Head of Pedagogy (2011-2018), she led a significant expansion of provision for instrumental music teacher education across the RBC curriculum. Luan has also previously held the position of Interim Vice Principal, with oversight of learning and teaching in Music at RBC. Luan's research explores how undergraduate conservatoire students can develop pedagogical knowledge. Informed by academics, employers, students and alumni, it aims to counteract a long-held notion that teaching is as a second-class profession, and demonstrates that, through specialist modules, professional placements and mentoring, students can develop transferable skills, qualities, awareness, behaviours, values, and a sense of social responsibility to nurture the next generation of musicians.

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