

## **Conservatoire staff perspectives on the role of alumni in higher music education: who benefits?**

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# **Conservatoire staff perspectives on the role of alumni in higher music education: who benefits?**

## **Abstract**

The forging and maintenance of alumni relations is critical to the sustainability of Higher Music Education Institutions worldwide. In contrast to university-based career mentoring programmes, research about the role of alumni in conservatoire students' professional development is scarce. Alumni profiles are often used to support conservatoires' marketing campaigns, featuring graduates perceived as having the most 'successful' careers. Yet, alumni can contribute significantly to conservatoire education by being honest about their lived experiences as graduates and breaking down perceived barriers relating to what constitutes success in music. This research addresses a significant gap in the literature by involving conservatoire staff as participants. Firstly, perspectives on alumni involvement in a UK conservatoire's day-to-day activity were gathered from 64 staff via an online questionnaire. Subsequently, researcher observations of a series of career seminars led by ten alumni provided context for semi-structured interviews with two academic staff who organised the series. The findings, which are developed into a model for 'alumni in conservatoire education', show that whilst conservatoire staff were committed to supporting students' professional development through alumni activities, the benefits of alumni contributions for the professional development of staff could be more widely recognised, to further develop institutional approaches to supporting student-professional transition.

Keywords: higher music education, conservatoire alumni, conservatoire staff, conservatoire students, music careers, alumni in conservatoire education

## **Introduction and research context**

For many years, the forging and maintenance of alumni relations has been critical to the sustainability of Higher Education Institutions worldwide. Writing about the international higher music education landscape specifically, and the conservatoire sector in particular, Sturrock claims that ‘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’ (2007, p. 9). Despite being written almost two decades ago, this statement remains wholly pertinent. Conservatoires train musicians to high levels of proficiency in music performance and other ‘principal study’ disciplines, such as composition. Typically, principal study provision in a conservatoire comprises one-to-one lessons with an expert in the discipline, and group activities such as workshops, ensembles, forums and masterclasses. Alongside principal study, students are required to engage with a range of supporting/academic musical activities, for example, musicianship skills, music history, and pedagogy. Despite this seemingly balanced curriculum, the term ‘principal study’ is arguably divisive, with ‘dominant discourses placing performance as the pinnacle of success for a musician [such that] it is not uncommon for students to feel ‘second-rate’ if they redefine their career aims to include activities beyond performance’ (Perkins, 2012: 11). Ford (2010) and Shaw (2023) concur, suggesting that conservatoires place such emphasis on celebrating performance successes, that graduates’ achievements in other areas (such as music teaching or careers outside the music profession) appear to be less widely acknowledged.

According to Creech et al. (2008), ‘Higher education music institutions face a tall order, taking responsibility for equipping music students for facing the challenges of

the music profession and also for supporting those whose transition pathways lead to alternatives to a performance career’ (p. 329). Several years on, gaps between institutional provision and student readiness for the profession continue to be concerning for conservatoires globally. For example, in the UK, ‘many conservatoire students are unaware of the realities of building a career in music’ (Blackstone, 2019, p. 241), and employers perceive a mismatch between music students’ training and workplace expectations (Clark et al., 2015; Shaw, 2023). Similarly, in the USA, Kauffman (2018) claims that conservatoire students ‘need to be prepared for the types of jobs that they will most likely be accepting to make a living after graduation’ (p.26), whilst in Canada, the need to realign university curriculum has been recommended to enable music graduates to develop skills relevant for an increasingly diverse music industry (Brook and Fostaty Young, 2019). In Australia, Bennett and Bridgstock (2015), found that music graduates encountered ‘enforced entrepreneurship, multiple roles, the need to build and run a small business, [find] their niche, and [...] retain and refine their technical skills even when undertaking other work’ (p. 274).

According to Burland et al. (2023), alumni have much to offer as mentors in higher music education since students 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). Indeed, alumni can support the development of ‘possible selves’ in students, influencing ‘how individuals think about their potential and about their future’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986, p. 954). However, whilst a career in music can be personally and professionally rewarding, it is not typically known for financial stability (Help Musicians, 2023) and as a result parents may discourage their children from pursuing it as a career (Miksza and Hime, 2015). Thus, according to Bennett and Bridgstock (2015) ‘institutions have an ethical

responsibility to represent the career opportunities and challenges associated with their degrees, particularly if they are marketing [them] based on vocational outcomes' (p. 274).

A key outcome of Shaw's research (2021; 2023; 2024) was that conservatoire alumni were keen to use insights gained during their early careers to help current students to navigate theirs, and that the alumni-led sessions they had attended themselves as students were revelatory in this regard (Shaw, 2024). Whilst related research focuses on student and alumni perspectives on conservatoire education, for example, Blackstone (2019) and Porton (2020), conservatoire staff perspectives on alumni contributions to conservatoire life appear to be a largely untapped resource.

## **Materials and methods**

The current study seeks to gain insights into conservatoire staff perspectives by investigating the following research questions:

- i) In what ways do alumni feature in and/or contribute to the life and work of conservatoires?
- and
- ii) To what extent is this activity beneficial, and for whom?

A multi-method approach (Robson and McCartan, 2016) was adopted in order to: a) gain a broad overview from a UK conservatoire's staff of the ways in which alumni contributed to different areas of the institution's activity, and b) focus on a single specific alumni-led project organised by two conservatoire academics. Following ethical approval via the relevant institutional committee and in accordance with the BERA guidelines (2018), informed consent was sought from and granted by a range of

participants on the understanding that their anonymity would be preserved throughout the data collation, analysis and subsequent reporting stages.

Firstly, a questionnaire was distributed by email to the entire target population: 81 permanent staff members (excluding the researcher) and 228 visiting tutors. This volunteer sampling method (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) was inclusive, offering all staff (including members of senior management, teaching staff, administrative and events staff, and non-salaried visiting tutors working with students aged 18+) the opportunity to participate.

The questionnaire was devised using a General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant online survey tool: [onlinesurveys.ac.uk](https://onlinesurveys.ac.uk) (version 2) to protect participants' sensitive data (BERA 2018) and was designed with the recommendations of Bell (2010) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) in relation to style, length, and avoidance of ambiguity. Staff were able to respond anonymously regarding whether they had invited alumni to contribute to the conservatoire's activity in the past. Where applicable, they were asked to indicate the type of activity, and who was involved. Staff were also invited to reflect on their perceived success of the event, share any plans to involve alumni in the conservatoire's activity in the future, with details if available, and state whether they were aware of alumni activity taking place outside of their own area of work at the conservatoire.

A total of 64 staff responded to the survey, 33 of whom were permanent staff (representing 40.7% of the original sample of 81). The remaining 31 respondents were visiting tutors/non-permanent staff (representing 13.6% of the original sample of 228). Table 1 shows both the number of staff participants represented across different areas of the conservatoire and the percentage of the total sample. In the interests of preserving

participants' anonymity in accordance with the ethical considerations outlined above, alphanumeric codes were assigned to participants.

*[Table 1 near here]*

Secondly, the researcher observed a series of five career seminars scheduled for third-year undergraduate and first-year postgraduate students across December 2023–January 2024. Each seminar was led jointly by two alumni who shared details of their career development and professional experiences since leaving the conservatoire. Given the author's positionality as a member of conservatoire staff, selection and invitation of the ten alumni was made by two other academic staff members (anonymised as SM1 and SM2) to ensure a representative sample. The researcher took detailed field notes during the sessions and subsequently shared written summaries with the ten alumni, nine of whom granted permission for these to be included in the current paper as anonymised 'vignettes' (A1–9). A list of [the alumni contributors](#) is shown in Table 2 and [follows the order](#) in which [the alumni](#) presented to the students [during the seminars](#).

*[Table 2 near here]*

[All nine vignettes feature prominently below \(see 'The alumni stories'\) to provide contextualisation for the final stage of the research, where the two conservatoire academics who had organised the career seminars were each engaged in an interview.](#) Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate data collection method, offering flexibility to adapt in the moment and develop lines of enquiry where necessary (Denscombe, 2014). Informed consent was obtained to conduct the interviews online



via the platform Microsoft Teams, utilising the transcription facility in the Teams app whilst recording the interview on a separate encrypted password protected device. Prior to the interviews, the researcher shared the written summaries of the alumni-led career seminars with the academics to refresh their memories and encourage them to reflect on the alumni-led sessions. Interview questions focused initially on ascertaining details about the academics' decision making when choosing alumni to participate, and the information given to alumni about their role in the sessions. The academics were then asked to reflect on the delivery and content of sessions, the perceived benefits or drawbacks of involving alumni in learning and teaching activity, and whether they believed they, and the wider conservatoire, could learn from alumni.

Statistical calculations of quantitative data from the staff survey were automatically generated via the [onlinesurveys.ac.uk](https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk) platform. Qualitative data from both the survey and interview transcripts were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate a process of thematic analysis (Creswell, 2012) where close line-by-line examination of the text facilitated the allocation of codes to meaningful words or phrases. 28 codes emerged from the survey and a further 43 from the interviews. Further refinement to the point of saturation enabled thematic groupings of closely related codes. The resulting overarching themes: 'Possibility', 'Connectivity', and 'Visibility' and their related subthemes are shown in Table 3.

*[Table 3 near here]*

The overarching themes that emerged from the interviews with the two academic staff members who had organised the alumni-led career seminars, were 'Role

models and representation', 'Sharing the journey' and 'Surviving and thriving'. These, along with their related subthemes are shown in Table 4.

*[Table 4 near here]*

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***The staff survey***

Of the 64 staff members completing the survey, 39 participants (60.9%) had previously involved alumni in conservatoire activity. Of these staff members, 26 (66.7%) were permanent staff members and 13 (33.3%) were non-permanent/visiting tutors. Staff participants reported having involved alumni in numerous ways (see Table 5).

*[Table 5 near here]*

Conservatoire staff participants who had previously involved alumni in one or more of the activity types listed in Table 5, were asked to consider the extent to which they felt the activity had been successful, and why. Responses focused largely on how beneficial the activity had been for various stakeholders, namely current students, the alumni themselves, or the wider institution.

### ***Possibility, Connectivity and Visibility***

The majority of staff participants seemed to have students' ongoing professional development at the forefront of their minds when reflecting on the success of activities that involved alumni. One staff member believed that it was important for alumni to showcase their work so that current students could '*see how a music degree can forge*

*performance opportunities*' (AT3). Another implied that alumni with '*long-established real-world experiences*' could enhance existing taught provision, by bringing '*extra knowledge, advice and wisdom about career choices and routes to success to the students*' (TS1). Furthermore, in light of criticism of what constitutes success in conservatoire education (Ford, 2010; Perkins, 2012; Porton, 2020; Shaw, 2023), the following insights are also pertinent:

Students have really valued [alumni] input and I think it has been helpful in framing the relevance of some of the [course] content that is covered [...]. Although many of the messages were similar to those that current staff are reinforcing in terms of wider professional skill development, hearing these [messages] from someone who is not currently a member of the student/staff community gives a sharper sense of connectedness to professional practice' (L9).

Several participants concurred with L9 regarding the relatability of alumni for current students. For example, one participant had found that students had asked questions of alumni that they may not have felt comfortable asking a tutor: '*Sometimes they seem to find [alumni] more approachable than staff members*' (OPTS4). Others suggested that, as a result of being able to connect and relate to alumni, students '*imagine themselves in the future and believe in their own ability to succeed and become employable*' (L3) and '*are able to clearly see an embodiment of progression to professional, which can really help to inspire and motivate them*' (SMT4). Furthermore, according to SMT6, alumni involvement '*opens students' eyes to career possibilities they may not previously have considered; in particular it enables students to envisage themselves being able to achieve the same.*'

Whilst endorsing the element of relatability identified by their colleagues, L4 suggested that *‘sharing common challenges’* was of reciprocal benefit to both students and recent graduates. It was also proposed that placing alumni alongside students in side-by-side orchestral or chamber music performance projects elevates students’ playing, inspiring the students and raising standards, *‘whilst also giving valuable opportunities to alumni’* (L5). Indeed, it was also intimated that involving alumni in the delivery of the conservatoire’s outreach projects for young people under 18 years of age *‘helps [alumni] transition into the professional world’* (VT10), whilst students can be supported to gain an increased understanding of *‘what level of musicianship is required [of] emerging professionals at the next stage of their career’* (OPTS6). Furthermore, it was suggested that under-18 participants can also be inspired by peers who are further along in their musical journeys.

Importantly, inviting alumni to contribute to conservatoire activity was viewed as a way of *‘show[ing] continued support and care for what they have gone on to do’* (L12). On the one hand, this caring approach extended to the organisation of celebratory events (both at home and overseas) where the conservatoire enabled alumni to reunite, socialise and perform together. On the other, it appeared that invitations to alumni to participate in such events, especially overseas, were strategic, as SMT2 explained:

Alumni events abroad have multiple benefits: 1. They are an effective way to strengthen [the conservatoire’s] ties with the music education industry in the target country, working as support to our recruitment; 2. They enhance [the conservatoire’s] visibility and reputation; 3. They reinforce in our alumni a sense of identity, belonging and connection with the conservatoire; 4. They help alumni to keep in touch among[st] them[selves].

Indeed, it was suggested by one participant that alumni are *'intangible [assets] to recruitment and profile'* (L12). As such, it seemed important to staff participants to select alumni carefully for various forms of activity, with one colleague (L6) choosing alumni who *'served as brilliant examples of what is possible for our students'*, and another (SMT4) only appointing those who *'have the capability of leading student sessions'*. Other participants revealed that they would seek to invite alumni to contribute to activity if they exhibited certain skills, qualities and behaviours, for example, those who have proven *'reliable, trustworthy and present the conservatoire in a good light'* (AT1) or built a good *'track record during their time as students [and] word of mouth evidence that they are still doing good things out in the real world'* (L8). Furthermore, L8 would *'make a point of making sure current students know they are alumni'*. Whilst this approach might demonstrate to current students what it is possible for them to achieve, it also reveals the staff member's sense of pride in alumni achievements. This sense of pride was shared by several staff, including one participant (SMT6) who had previously been involved in employing alumni and appointing them to the permanent staff team: *'It's great to be able to employ our own graduates because they are so well qualified for what we need them to do!'* One participant went a stage further in considering how alumni have the capacity to support the institution's civic responsibilities to the wider community, suggesting that graduates who have gone on to work in music education in the UK and overseas *'are key to developing a longer-term strategy to impact young people on their music education journeys, using music for social and emotional benefits with young people'* (L10).

The findings from the staff survey resonate with literature discussed above, in that multiple benefits for students of engaging with alumni were acknowledged, especially

in relation to inspiring students to develop what Burland et al. (2023) define as ‘employability thinking’ (p. 27). However, taking this thinking a stage further, staff participants also acknowledged numerous benefits for the alumni themselves (see Table 3). Whilst areas such as marketing and recruitment and the role of alumni in maintaining institutional visibility remained important to staff survey participants, there was also clear acknowledgement of alumni as external sources of industry-relevant information that might lead students to imagine a range of ‘possible selves’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Indeed, the nine alumni contributors whose stories follow in the next section, align closely with a suggestion by Kaufmann (2018) that music students should be exposed to examples of the types of work they are likely to undertake during their future careers.

### *The alumni stories*

The majority of A1’s income came from instrumental teaching. At the time of the series of career seminars, A1 enjoyed teaching large numbers of children on a weekly basis across small group and whole class instrumental lessons in the North of England. A1 found administration to be the most challenging aspect of their role, stating ‘*my car is my office*’ when travelling from school to school on a daily basis. Nevertheless, A1 was evidently committed to ensuring that children are given the opportunity to learn a musical instrument. Revealing their surprise at ‘*how much kids love music*’, A1 laughed as they reflected on the way children welcomed them to their school each week, making them ‘*feel like a celebrity*’. Whilst committed to their current role, which they had gained largely as a result of specialising in instrumental music pedagogy throughout their degree, A1 aspired to become a professional orchestral musician, and believed that their salaried teaching work offered security whilst allowing

them the freedom to spend time honing their playing through auditions and concert participation.

Originally from Taiwan, A2 was able to offer insights on life as an international graduate living and working in the UK. As a student, A2 had participated in a ballet piano training scheme, and had been offered a significant amount of work in that field since graduating. They had also been employed in a graduate assistant role in a school music department, specialising in piano accompaniment. A2 encouraged the students present to speak openly about their concerns regarding their futures, sharing that their own worries included finance and confidence: *'I doubt myself a lot'*. A2 recommended that it is important to *'believe what you have is what you need'*, to *'have a vision, be prepared [and] find your niche'*.

When graduating from the conservatoire two decades earlier, A3 was originally on the path to a career in ballet piano, but an injury curtailed their playing career. After coming to terms with the situation, A3 sought a role outside the field of music that would enable career progression and a means *'to pay the bills'* and was now a high-level manager for a global retail company, having worked their way up over a period of 17 years. Whilst A3's current role was *'a different world'* to the conservatoire environment, the transferable skills learned at the conservatoire, such as making adaptations during performances and presenting themselves confidently on stage, were invaluable to them in their current role. Indeed, A3 suggested that students should *'never underestimate the level of skill and detail that goes into practising. You'd be surprised that a lot of people I work with don't have that level of skill and professionalism, so you can be confident'*. However, they also recommended that students should seek out *'opportunities to converse on a professional level, such as staff-student committees, mentoring [and] outreach projects.'* At the same time, A3

recognised that saying yes to everything had been their downfall and that their own playing career suffered as a result. *‘Be the person to be called upon, but be disciplined about your physicality as well. Know what your limit is and push it, but don’t go beyond it too much.’* A3 now performed in an amateur capacity, and urged the current students never to *‘underestimate the joy of playing with others’*. Finally, A3 emphasised the importance of using opportunities taken up whilst at college as a ‘springboard’ and to not be afraid to try something new. *‘The first time I was exposed to piano for dance, one of the virtuoso student pianists was asked to have a go. But they didn’t want to, or couldn’t, because they were so focused on concerto prep. Don’t do the safe thing. Do something that challenges you and helps others to see you differently. It’s from there that work opens up. Take a risk. Be unique. Be yourself’*.

Since leaving the conservatoire’s vocal department, A4 had been determined to keep an open mind as they did not want to *‘be boxed into one style’*. They had taken on work that was *‘completely outside what they had been used to’*, for example, performing with art installations, and streaming recitals (a necessity during Covid-19) *‘rather than closing [themselves] off to opportunities’*. Speaking of opera specifically, A4 shared a professional audition experience that had led them to be thankful for their former conservatoire performance classes with the requirement to learn and perform a new song every single week. A4 admitted that they did not understand the need for such a strict regime when they were a student, but in hindsight, they acknowledged that they would not have been able to prepare the audition repertoire so quickly without it. A4 also valued working outside of music, to give themselves space and time to think about something else as well as gaining some financial security: *‘Never feel guilty about any work you’re doing – you have to eat!’* Equally, alongside continuing to develop their vocal technique, the Covid-19 lockdown offered A4 the freedom to explore [a wide](#)



range of repertoire they had never previously had the opportunity to sing whilst studying at the conservatoire, the feeling that *'no one is judging me now'* broadening their skillset to include genres such as musicals and pop. Having performed in two operas after lockdown, they were unsure how long they would be able to sustain a living on that kind of work alone, and so community recitals became an important source of income and artistic fulfilment. The main takeaways A4 was keen to communicate to students were to *'stay open-minded, be flexible, learn, adapt, and don't doubt your musicianship no matter where you end up later in life'*.

A5, a former composition student, emphasised the importance of collaborating across disciplines. Whilst at the conservatoire, many project opportunities had emerged from meetings in the pub with like-minded students from other artistic disciplines - and this way of working had proved successful after graduation. Whilst A5 had felt the need to compromise in some collaborative relationships to help other artists to meet their own professional goals, they were also mindful of the need to *'spin as many plates as possible'* without losing quality. *'Getting people to join you on your journey'* was important to A5, who was convinced that the reflective writing tasks they had been required to complete as a student had been really helpful in writing subsequent funding bids and persuading employers, stakeholders, and even celebrities, that investing in their work would be worthwhile.

A6 had transitioned from undergraduate to postgraduate training in composition and subsequently into a professional artist programme without taking breaks in between. They appeared to regret not taking time out, suggesting that *'none of it is worth it unless you're healthy and happy'*. Currently taking time out to reflect on their career to date, A6 shared that taking a job in marketing had enabled them to earn *'some basic income'* whilst building important transferable skills that would help promote

their own work. Importantly, they recommended that current students view perceived failures as learning experiences: *'I don't see anything as a failure anymore'*. When considering offers of work, A6 no longer felt obliged to accept straightaway, but considered them carefully from three clear perspectives: i) Is the work financially viable? ii) What are the benefits to career and all-round development? and iii) Will the work be enjoyable and offer personal fulfilment?

A7 was a jazz musician who, after graduating, said 'yes' to a huge range of opportunities, whilst taking steps to ensure they would be asked back to undertake further work. A7 shared a trick involving *'a little black book'* where they used to write down the names of all contacts encountered on different jobs, purely so that they could check their names before meeting them a second time in order to make a good impression: *'It can be such a volatile industry [...] Some things have held on, some have dropped away.'* A7 had also *'needed to learn how to be a teacher [...] cutting his teeth in some [challenging] schools'*. In relation to securing contacts for work after college, A7 advised against spending too much time alone in a practice room and recommended getting to know other students they may likely want and need to work with in the future: *'If you've made good connections with people, you can get back in touch with people'*. Speaking from experience, A7 advised: *'You will never have the amount of time you have now: take advantage of it!'* Reflecting on changing priorities over time, A7 recommended taking the time to think about *'real life things'* such as taking a pension when the opportunity arises. A7 now had a family and so returning home at 4am after a late-night gig was no longer a viable (or desirable) option. In fact, they had recently been appointed to a salaried position, converted from a freelance position they had sustained and grown since 2015. The financial security offered by this part-time work meant that A7 no longer felt compelled to say yes to everything, as they

now enjoyed the freedom and autonomy to choose what music to play and which gigs to accept.

A8, a woodwind player, felt they had developed resilience from having had '*a lot of bumps in the road*' as a student performer. Realising that their calling was in the field of music outreach work and seeing this as their '*safe space*', A8 chose to specialise in pedagogy and community music, gaining significant experience relevant to their professional career aspirations whilst at the conservatoire. A8 suggested that students should not underestimate the value of taking on unpaid work opportunities to build their experience and CV because making a good impression as a volunteer could often lead to paid work at a later date: '*Some of the most exciting things I did at conservatoire came from voluntary opportunities*'. They now worked as a teacher in a school for children with special educational needs and disabilities, a role which had its rewards but also many challenges. A8 regretted that they did not learn how to manage their financial and tax affairs whilst they were still studying. Above all, they were keen to warn current students against burn out, and most importantly, advised them to ask for support when needed.

Specialising as a historical music instrumentalist for the majority of their degree and actively pursuing singing activities alongside, A9 was adamant they did not want to teach. However, they did find themselves taking on teaching work, which they realised was hugely valuable, not least in enabling them to '*hold down*' their freelance performing work with orchestras in the UK and overseas '*without being financially dependent on it*'. A9 shared an amusing anecdote about an early orchestral audition experience where, having anticipated needing to be available for up to four days for various rounds, the audition lasted no more than four minutes, after which they were thanked and sent home! A9 reassured students that while there will inevitably be

setbacks and disappointments like this, *‘with patience, life will get better’*. A9 had been strategic: *‘I applied for things that might lead somewhere, and I got to be the warm-up act for a really famous [performer], which enhanced my CV.’* A9 recommended that students *‘try to come away from [conservatoire] with as many social skills as possible’*, including being friendly, open-minded and calm in stressful situations.

### *Summary of the alumni stories*

Observing the alumni-led career seminars as a conservatoire staff member and researcher was illuminating. Whilst some graduates reflected on aspects of their former course that had been helpful in shaping their subsequent professional journeys, others emphasised the importance of being proactive in seeking out opportunities to develop their skills beyond the minimum course requirements. Indeed, where students had undertaken voluntary work or participated in work placements as students, these had often led to paid employment in one or more related areas post-graduation. The notion of transferable skills formed a significant part of the alumni reflections, especially when seeking salaried work to help sustain less-than-lucrative artistic activity, or in the case of one graduate, building a successful career outside music following a curtailed playing career. Being adaptable and openminded had proved beneficial for graduates who had taken the initiative as students to collaborate across disciplines, or who, upon graduating, had found the freedom to explore previously untapped genres. For most of the graduates involved in the career seminars, it appeared that it was important to find a balance that offered financial viability, ongoing professional development and personal fulfilment whilst maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The common strands arising from the alumni career seminars are summarised as follows:

- View specific course content as an opportunity to converse/operate on a professional/social level and a springboard to gaining work opportunities/project

funding. The relevance of some course content may not be immediately apparent, but it may be useful post-graduation (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8, A9).

- Take on salaried work in or outside music to allow the financial security to pursue artistic goals and develop transferable skills, without feeling guilty for doing so (A1, A3, A4, A5, A6, A8, A9).
- Develop confidence and self-belief, view failures as learning opportunities: coping with the unexpected will become easier to navigate (A2, A3, A4, A6, A7).
- Have a vision, find your niche, do something new and stand out. Form connections with peers: collaborations with fellow students may lead to future work opportunities (A2, A3, A4, A5, A7, A8).
- Look after your health, be self-disciplined about physicality and take time out when needed, whilst being strategic when deciding whether to say yes to offers of work (A3, A6, A7, A9).

### *The staff interviews*

As noted, the interviewees with the two academics (SM1 and SM2) who had organised the career seminars offered opportunities for these staff members to reflect on content and delivery, as well as the perceived value of the sessions from an institutional learning and development perspective.

### *Role models and representation*

During the interviews, it transpired that representation **had been** a significant factor for SM1 and SM2 when considering who to invite to lead the career seminars for current

students. Having taken initial recommendations from several of their colleagues across the institution before narrowing the alumni down to a selection of ten, both staff members had felt it important to feature alumni across a range of principal study specialisms (e.g., instrumentalists, singers, composers), with those graduates each working across different musical fields (for example, performance, education, arts administration). SM1 had aimed to involve *‘a range of people who had only just graduated to people who are a little bit further down the line’*, whilst also seeking to achieve a gender balance and include graduates working in sectors other than music. SM2 believed it was important to invite individuals from different backgrounds to include international graduates and those who had a *‘good academic and performance profile’* as students. These aims for representation appeared to align with those of the staff survey where it was suggested that alumni can be positive role models for students.

### *Sharing the journey*

When advising alumni how to deliver their session content, SM1 asked the alumni to focus on aspects of their careers that they had enjoyed, or been challenged by, whilst considering essential skills within their professional roles that they might not have considered so essential when they were students. SM1 also asked the alumni to consider the extent to which their conservatoire education had impacted on their career decision-making or trajectory: *‘sharing their journey from graduation to where they are now [...] thinking about what they had found useful in their education at the conservatoire and what they wished they’d known’* at the time. *‘In fact, one of the things I asked them was “If you were giving advice to yourself when you were in the position of the audience, what would you say?”’*. Alumni were invited to present as they saw fit, though suggestions from SM1 and SM2 had included using slides, speaking off-script,

or participating ‘in conversation’ with SM1. Irrespective of delivery style and content, both SM1 and SM2 felt that it was important that students were given the opportunity to ask questions of the alumni, evidently recognising the potential approachability of alumni as a bridge between staff and students.

### *Surviving and thriving*

When reflecting on the alumni-led series of career seminars, the two staff interviewees’ views aligned with those of the survey participants, in relation to the benefits for students. SM2 suggested that alumni can help students to visualise future career possibilities: *‘If you don’t go and see, you don’t think it’s possible’*. Moreover, for SM1, the alumni-led series appeared to be about raising awareness amongst students of the skills and attributes they would need to survive and thrive beyond their conservatoire education. Intriguingly, SM1 suggested that in addition to being *‘a really effective way to show students what their options could conceivably be’*, the series was designed to *‘force current students to hear [about] the breadth of opportunities that are out there’*. The word ‘force’ seems rather a strong word in this context, but it perhaps resonates with issues around the prevalence of principal study activity in conservatoires discussed above (see Research context). Despite reservations about quality control discussed above, SM1 appeared to appreciate alumni who were *‘disarmingly honest about [their] journey’*, suggesting that their stories could actually help students who were experiencing feelings of doubt or concern about finding work and juggling a range of commitments in the future:

It’s such a positive thing because students who are thinking ‘I don’t know whether I’m going to be able to hack this’ can look at [former student who has] owned up to not

hacking it and it's not the end of the world. Similarly, [graduate] who had to stop playing because of injury, and [another] who [does] a whole range of things [including] working in a shop. I just think that's really nice for students to think 'Actually, I could do that'. That's not so bad'. On the other hand, [graduate] who has made CDs and gone on to play with orchestras: that's another thing students can think 'Maybe that's what I'm going to do'.

Equally, SM1 highlighted the potential for alumni contributions to be unhelpful and potentially discouraging to soon-to-be graduates with ambitions to pursue a particular path: '*A potential pitfall would be if they were to become negative or say something that was misleading*'. Indeed, SM1 suggested that the 'in conversation' model was helpful in that regard, because the alumni could then be supported during their presentation and guided towards areas of interest to a particular student cohort. SM1's view is pertinent given potential issues of '*quality control*' expressed by SM2. Although alumni had been invited to contribute to the career seminars on the basis of having a built a good professional reputation, they were not necessarily confident presenters: '*If you're a good performer, that doesn't mean you're a good teacher. If you're good at what you do, that doesn't mean you're good at talking in public*' (SM2). Whilst the preferences of SM1 and SM2 appeared to vary depending on the personalities and presentation styles involved, they were in no doubt that the series of career seminars should be repeated. Indeed, during the interviews, it was evident that the two staff members had already begun to consider ways in which they could take on responsibility for briefing the alumni more fully and facilitating a deeper level of interaction from students.



### *Learnings for Higher Music Education staff*

Further to their reflections about alumni content and delivery and the logistical processes involved in organising and running the career seminars, both participants were encouraged to consider what they themselves had learned from the alumni, and whether the wider conservatoire staff might benefit from the provision alongside their students. Whilst SM2 did not feel they had learned anything new, they did suggest that they could relate directly to some of the difficulties these graduates had encountered: *‘I’m relatively young so the struggles they talked about really resonated with me. I struggled with money when I first graduated’*. SM2 also reflected on their peers’ experiences at that time: *‘Some of [them] did a gig, not knowing when the next gig would be.’* Indeed, this affinity with the early-career experiences of certain alumni led SM2 to critique the conservatoire’s approach to preparing students to survive and thrive in professional life:

[Some] of the alumni talked about money and planning, financial budget and all that, [which] I think we overlook. Talking about money doesn’t seem like part of teaching music in a conservatoire world, but actually, that’s everybody’s life! How do you feed yourself, rent and eventually buy somewhere?

Elaborating further, SM2 suggested that staff could learn from alumni particularly regarding digital literacy, and the use of Artificial Intelligence and social media to find work in music:

I feel that a lot of staff don’t believe in AI yet or are not confident in using it, so they don’t talk about it in lessons. But most of the alumni I’ve seen [have] used some kind of

AI [...] or online media platform to help them get a job. Staff can learn how self-promotion works now as opposed to 20 years ago. I'm sure it's different.

SM1 shared that one of the most important things they themselves had learned from the alumni-led seminars was that *'there are many, many different forms of success. I think because a musical training is a vocational thing, it's very easy to get into a mindset that there is a definition of success, which I don't think is healthy.'* SM1 evidently felt a sense of pride, not only in the graduates' achievements but in the way they had shown resilience.

I was really impressed by all of them. It was an emotional experience in a funny kind of way. I was quite moved by their individual experiences, the way that they'd come up against challenges and how they got around them. And so, I learnt that everyone does it differently. All of them were successful in their different ways. And each of them had approached their work life in completely different ways and yet they were all flourishing.

The findings from the interviews support and build on recommendations by researchers such as Sturrock, 2007; Creech et al., 2008; Clark et al., 2015; Blackstone, 2019; and Shaw, 2023; 2024) that involving alumni in conservatoire activity plays a vital role in bridging a gap between course-level activity and professional contexts. Previous research has highlighted the reciprocal benefits of alumni involvement for both students and graduates, and the need for greater dialogue between institutions and industry for the mutual benefit of conservatoire students and their potential future employers, yet there has been little emphasis on the benefits of alumni involvement for staff

development, especially in conservatoires. As such, the findings from the current study have been developed into a model, discussed below.

### **Concluding remarks: implications for conservatoires**

Whilst this study focused on a single conservatoire in a specific geographical area, the findings raise important issues of relevance to Higher Music Education Institutions worldwide, demonstrating that alumni may be undervalued in terms of their potential to drive change in conservatoires.

It was evident that alumni had contributed to conservatoire life in a wide range of ways, with activity including concert performances (both internal and external, including overseas events), recordings, outreach projects, side-by-side initiatives, career-focused workshops, teaching and mentoring. However, conservatoire staff were not always aware of alumni contributions outside their own areas of the conservatoire's provision, suggesting that more could be done to share good practice across the institution. Nevertheless, alongside concerns about recruitment and institutional sustainability (which many participants felt that alumni initiatives could support), the commitment of the conservatoire's staff to the professional development of students was not in doubt. Indeed, it was clear that students were at the forefront of staff members' minds when reflecting on the benefits of alumni activity, though interestingly, very few survey respondents appeared to consider how they themselves might learn from graduates' career insights. Conversely, of the two interviewee participants who were asked directly whether they or the wider conservatoire staff could learn from alumni, one recognised their own affinity (as a young staff member) with the graduates' early-career experiences, whilst the other acknowledged the diversity of approaches to surviving and thriving in professional life. In both cases, the alumni-led career seminars triggered further reflection amongst the two staff interviewees (and

indeed the researcher, also a staff member) regarding how the conservatoire might collaborate further with alumni to better support students' career preparation.

All of the alumni contributors were resourceful in exploring employment opportunities beyond their narrowly-defined former 'principal study' disciplines. Indeed, having experienced a student-professional transition more recently than their former tutors, it would seem that, by being honest about their lived experiences post-graduation and sharing difficulties negotiated and overcome, alumni can play a vital role in shaping institutional approaches to preparing students to be resilient in professional life, whilst challenging and expanding student and staff perceptions about what constitutes success for music graduates.

To conclude, the overarching themes discussed previously are revisited in Figure 1 (below). The findings and the emerging model 'Alumni in conservatoire education' (ACE) show that alumni initiatives in conservatoires (and indeed in all Higher Education Institutions) have the capacity to be mutually beneficial to all stakeholders.

*[Figure 1 near here]*

- By being introduced to alumni, conservatoire students can be exposed to career possibilities they may not have previously considered, including those unrelated to the principal study discipline. Furthermore, students can be introduced to useful contacts and industry-relevant career preparation strategies that have been tried and tested in the professions by their more experienced peers.
- Whilst alumni are often viewed (and used) as a means to enhance institutional visibility and profile, alumni can also help to connect staff to the reality of early professional life for conservatoire graduates. In turn, raising staff awareness of

students' career preparation needs may have positive implications for curriculum development.

- The reflective process involved in sharing experiences with students has the potential to be beneficial to the alumni themselves, whilst reconnecting them with former tutors and peers may help them to maintain and grow their professional networks.

In closing, it is worth reflecting once more on Bennett and Bridgstock (2015) who stated that 'institutions have an ethical responsibility to represent the career opportunities and challenges associated with their degrees, particularly if they are marketing [them] based on vocational outcomes' (p. 274). The current study aligns with this recommendation whilst proposing two further important points for conservatoires to consider, as follows:

- i) Where alumni profiles are used as a recruitment tool to support marketing campaigns on institutional websites, these should be representative of a wide range of graduate destinations (including those outside of music)  
and
- ii) conservatoire staff should collaborate with alumni to drive institutional change and ensure that students are fully supported to navigate their future diverse and likely complex career pathways.

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*Table 1: Conservatoire staff survey participants*

<b><i>Conservatoire staff – areas of responsibility</i></b>	<b><i>Permanent/ Non-permanent (P/NP)</i></b>	<b><i>No. of respondents</i></b>	<b><i>% of overall sample</i></b>	<b><i>Alphanumeric codes</i></b>
Visiting teaching staff (principal study/academic)	NP	31	48.4	VT1–31
Head/Associate Head of Department or Course/Research Lead	P	14	21.9	L1–14
Other permanent teaching staff (principal study/academic)	P	7	10.9	OPTS1–7
Senior Management Team member	P	6	9.4	SMT1–6
Administration Team (management/course/department/events)	P	4	6.3	AT1–4
Technical support staff	P	2	3.1	TS1–2

*Table 2: Alumni contributors*

Contributor	Year of graduation	Course levels(s) studied: Undergraduate/Postgraduate
A1	2022	Postgraduate
A2	2021	Postgraduate
A3	2005	Undergraduate
A4	2018	Postgraduate
A5	2018	Postgraduate
A6	2019/2021	Undergraduate/Postgraduate
A7	2011/2018	Undergraduate/Postgraduate
A8	2020	Undergraduate
A9	2019	Undergraduate

*Table 3: Summary of overarching and subthemes relating to conservatoire staff survey*

Perceived benefits for students	Perceived benefits for alumni	Perceived benefits for institution
<b>Possibility</b>	<b>Connectivity</b>	<b>Visibility</b>
Motivation Inspiration Aspiration Self-belief Awareness Learning Potential Encouragement Approachable Relatable Identity	Networks Togetherness Belonging Identity Support Care Experience Opportunity Employability	Reputation Professionalism Quality Recruitment Strategy

*Table 4: Summary of overarching and subthemes relating to academic staff member interviews*

<p><b>Role models and representation</b></p> <p>Range/variety of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specialist disciplines</li> <li>- backgrounds</li> <li>- genders</li> <li>- career types/stages</li> </ul> <p>Good academic/performance profile as students</p>
<p><b>Sharing the journey</b></p> <p>Content and delivery preferences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Well-structured/well-prepared</li> <li>- Informative and interactive</li> <li>- Enjoyment experienced</li> <li>- Challenges encountered and negotiated</li> <li>- Honesty (helpful)</li> </ul> <p>Content and delivery issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Quality control</li> <li>- Presenters not necessarily good teachers</li> <li>- Honesty (unhelpful)</li> </ul> <p>Foresight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Career possibilities</li> <li>- Advice: essential skills required for the professions</li> </ul> <p>Hindsight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ‘What they wish they’d known’</li> <li>- Impact of conservatoire training on career path</li> </ul>
<p><b>Surviving and thriving</b></p> <p>Possibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 21<sup>st</sup> century self-promotion/self-management</li> <li>- Diversity of approaches to working life</li> <li>- Empathy regarding early career challenges</li> <li>- Pride in students’ achievements/resilience</li> <li>- Many different forms of success</li> </ul>

*Table 5: Types of alumni involvement in conservatoire activity*

External professional engagements (booked by external promoters via conservatoire agency)
Performances at celebratory concerts, events and festivals (including overseas)
Side-by-side orchestral/chamber projects at conservatoire
Academic teaching
Principal-study specific (e.g., performance/composition) lectures/workshops/masterclasses
One-to-one principal study (e.g. performance/composition) lessons
Professional development lectures and workshops
Learning and Participation (outreach) projects
Recording projects
Final year undergraduate students' final (major) projects
Workplace mentoring (e.g., instrumental teaching, music leadership, ballet piano training)
Principal study (e.g., performance/composition) examining
Marketing, recruitment/social media
Home-grown staff (e.g., teaching, administration, technical support, events)

## **Figure captions**

*Figure 1: Alumni in conservatoire education*