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Geographical and social demographic trends of A-level music students

Report for Royal College of Music & Royal Academy of Music

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Key findings

- Across 2013/14 to 2017/18, at least 60% of A-level music entries each came from schools in postcodes with POLAR ratings of 4 or 5, meaning that those from geographical areas with historic access to Higher Education are much more likely to engage in this qualification. The stability in this trend across this period is also a significant finding.
- Areas of lower levels of A-level music entry tend to correlate with lower POLAR ratings and greater levels of deprivation. This significant finding has profound implications for equitable access to music education, especially at advanced levels.
- The proportional distribution of A-level entries by POLAR rating has remained relatively stable across a five-year period. This is in the context of falling numbers of entries, but shows that these decreases are occurring across all POLAR ratings, and cannot be attributed to changes entry figures from specific POLAR ratings.
- South Central & North West London and South East & South London are the regions that see the highest number of entries across the analysis presented here, and also the largest range between entries within each POLAR category. This was a trend across the five years under consideration in this report, and points to some of the challenges around equality of access to A-level music, even within similar regions.
- Hertfordshire, Surrey, Hampshire, and Manchester are four local authorities with some of the highest numbers of A-level entrants. This status was maintained across multiple years in this analysis, and points to the relative stability of A-level music in these localities, including from the state-funded sector.
- Independent schools account for a disproportionately high number of A-level music entries when compared against national entry statistics. Trends observed in this analysis show that the proportion of entry centres from the independent sector has increased slightly over the last five years.
- State-funded students outnumber independent school students in many local authority areas, but these tend to be from those with lower average POLAR ratings. There are, however, a significant number of local authorities, including those from large cities, where entries from independent schools exceed those from state schools, raising questions around equality of access across the country.
- Over 20% of A-level music entries are clustered around fewer than 50 schools (just 4% of entry centres), with the makeup of this group changing little across the five years under consideration here. This highlights the trend of stability in centres of large entry across the country and may go some way to account for a relative lack of diversity in conservatoire applications nationwide.
- However, it should not be discounted that where there are only a small number of A-level entries, the young people involved might be strong-willed and taking this subject as an extra-curricular topic. Data from 2013/14 to 2015/16 shows a large number of schools fielding a small number of candidates, and this demonstrates the

effort some teachers are prepared to go to in order to defend a small subject like music. Although exact figures are suppressed from 2016/17 onwards, the number of entry centres would seem to support this continuing trend throughout the final two years of this analysis.

- Small average A-level music group sizes across all schools present a challenge to the sustainability of the qualification. From the data, we can identify that an average group size of just over 3 pupils appears to be the norm from 2013/14 to 2015/16, and we have little reason to believe this has changed significantly in 2016/17 and 2017/18. This is in the context of some individual schools entering more than 50 times the numbers of students that some local authorities can field. If students are to have equitable access to this qualification, it is vital that A-level music continues to be offered across the spectrum of schools and, importantly, across the entire country. Currently, this is not the case. The fact that in 2016/17 and 2017/18 90% of entry centres had their totals suppressed due not meeting a threshold of more than 5 students, is evidence in itself of the low levels of entry from many schools around the country, and the challenges facing its sustainability.
- Many of those local authorities who routinely entered small numbers of candidates are among those in the most disadvantaged areas of the country. This finding accords with the disproportionate representation of POLAR 4 and 5 postcodes amongst entries. Such a trend remained stable across the five years, meaning that little significant ground has been made in raising A-level music uptake in some disadvantaged areas. This apparent correlation needs careful monitoring going forward.

Preface

The music education research team from Birmingham City University, based in the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, were asked by the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Music to investigate changes in the demographics and uptake in A-level music over the last few years. This is a matter of significant importance not only for the higher music education sector in Conservatoires and Universities, but also for the pipeline of musicians of all types for the country and beyond. The ways in which these changes have been occurring, and the speed at which they have been taking place, is a matter of unease for all those concerned with the cultural life of the country. It may seem obvious, but it needs to be stated that a supply of high-level musicians cannot and does not begin at age 18, when schooling ends. It needs to have begun much earlier, in school classrooms and music hubs, from when children and young people are at a much earlier stage than choosing where to study at undergraduate level. Music needs to have begun in the early years, been developed through primary schools and on into secondary schools. Higher music education institutions cannot be charged with increasing access to their courses and simultaneously prevented from doing so by the pipeline upstream having been removed!

This report looks at the A-level music situation, but it also paints a picture of where there is a need to support younger students who may go forward to take A-level music in the future. As a country, we need to take a long hard look at what we have been doing to music education over the past few years, and engage critically with recent findings from the sector, of which this report is but one contribution. We hope it will be helpful.

Introduction and background to the research

The issues surrounding A-level music for students in schools, academies, and colleges is a significant one both for the students concerned, and for the future health of the creative economy in this country. Tied to this area of general concern is the increasingly marginalised status that music has in the curricula of many state schools and further education providers. The challenges are particularly pronounced in areas of lower socio-economic status, and it is likely that these will have knock-on implications for many HE music providers, including those in the conservatoire sector.

The prevalence of these challenges is not just to be found in anecdotal evidence. Recent research shows that music provision in many schools, especially those in poorer areas, is under threat as part of a broader diminishing of creative subjects in these areas (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, Incorporated Society of Musicians, & University of Sussex, 2019). A combination of factors are linked to this threat, including the introduction of the EBacc which, as reported in a recent BBC study, has resulted in many secondary schools – 432 out of the 480 schools surveyed – cutting back creative arts provision in terms of time, staff, or resources (Jeffreys, 2018). Indeed, corroborating evidence is found in the significant rise in the number of music departments operating with only up to one full-time equivalent member of staff, with one study reporting that 29% of music departments across the sample were resourced with a single member of staff, not always on a full-time basis (Daubney & Mackrill, 2016). The schools surveyed pointed to an ‘increased emphasis on core academic subjects, together with funding pressures’ as being key factors impacting upon the provision of creative subjects in the curriculum. The emphasis placed upon core EBacc subjects in schools with lower Ofsted ratings often results in significant parts of the curriculum being placed in a perilous position, with centralised performativity levers driving school leaders to focus upon these measures, often at the partial expense of a broad and balanced curriculum. Indeed, interviews conducted as part of this research with music hub leaders showed this was not just the case for schools with low Ofsted ratings:

Parents are telling us things like: the EBacc means they can’t choose music and art in the same “bucket”, which means we’ve told them to choose the subjects they can study in school and they’re going to do their music in the grades outside of school and they’ll still be able to play in the jazz orchestra, or the chamber orchestra or whatever music service group. That was their alternative music education because they weren’t able to choose that in school. (Music Education Hub leader interview, June 2018)

There is no doubting this. The schools serving less affluent areas don’t offer A-level music. If anything they will offer some sort of alternative qualification. What’s worrying is where relatively affluent schools, serving affluent areas where you think there would be a demand for it, they’re not offering it either. (Music Education Hub leader interview, June 2018)

In addition to the shrinking curriculum time dedicated to music, reductions in music staff levels significantly restrict the ability of schools to support music as an extra-curricular activity, such as through choirs and instrumental groups.

These factors, especially funding pressures which have become more acute in recent times, will undoubtedly hit those schools whose resources are already more limited, which in turn is likely to lead to a wider gap in the proportions entries from state and independent schools, a matter which we discuss in some detail in this report. Staffing for music classes in many state schools is already under threat, and it is likely that associated issues will become more pronounced in the years to come. There are already far fewer trainee teachers applying for music ITE courses (*inter alia* George, 2018; Savage & Barnard, 2019, p. 46) than there have been in recent years, and once they have qualified, fewer teachers remain in teaching within five years of finishing training (*inter alia* Worth, 2018) This highlights a potential future crisis in specialist-qualified teachers for music. These issues could have a profound effect on the numbers, as well as the diversity, of those proceeding through creative subjects at Key Stage 5 and, subsequently, the higher education music and conservatoires sector.

Such a widening of the participation gap also has significant implications for breadth of curriculum in Key Stages 3 and 4 across all schools, especially in schools where creative subjects are already being squeezed. This is borne out in data from the Cultural Learning Alliance, who reported a 9% drop in arts GCSE entries across the 2016/17 academic year, and a 28% drop since 2010 (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017). Although the way in which these decreases are spread across specific regions is unknown from this data, it suggests a general link between the narrowing of curricula and a decline in arts GCSE uptake. It is likely that the effects of such narrowing will be felt most strongly in areas of relatively low uptake of these subjects, with teachers being unable to justify small class sizes. The continued support for activities that have low GCSE conversion rates can be difficult to justify in a climate of pressurised budgets and high-stakes performativity data, such as Progress 8, which attract the most significant investment from SLTs.

With falling GCSE numbers, likely leading to lower levels of A-level entry, schools are increasingly seeking to reduce the amount of curriculum time devoted to the creative arts, instead prioritising what have come to be known as core 'academic' subjects. Daubney and Mackrill identified this trend in 2016 (Daubney & Mackrill, 2016), pointing to decreases in the average curriculum time devoted to music in Key Stage 3 (KS3), and falls in the mean average curriculum allocation for those engaged in what are known as 'carousel' models (where music has to share curriculum time with other arts subjects, such as Art and Drama). Thus, it is vital that music is both available and promoted in the upper key stages, especially if KS3 is to be viewed simply as preparation for GCSEs in an increasingly narrow set of GCSE choices, rather than a course of study in its own right.

KS3 is itself under threat as increasing numbers of schools are reducing the hitherto 3 year duration into 2 year programmes. This telescoping has the effect of reducing by a third the available time for music in these schools, with a knock-on effect on teacher timetables. Such a reduction in time is exacerbated by the widespread adoption of the carousel models discussed above, which conspire to further reduce the presence of arts subjects in the curriculum to a minority position. The extra time which results from this is often made

available for Key Stage 4 subjects, but, as we have seen, music is already reduced in this phase, and so this is of little help. These issues taken together affect not only timetabled music provision, but also teacher availability for running extra-curricular ensembles, such as choirs and orchestras; after all, with no full-time music teacher in a school, they cannot give up a lunchtime or after-school session to running such music-making activities. Indeed, this draws attention to a much broader problem, which is the reduced status of creativity within many school curricula (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education et al., 2019, p. 3). At the time of writing (April 2019), a music curriculum expert group has been established by Nick Gibb MP, Minister for Schools, and a contract to write a new model music curriculum has been awarded to ABRSM. The outcomes of this expert working group and commissioned model were not available at the time of writing, but monitoring the impact of such guidance documentation will be an important step moving forward.

Methodology

Desk-based data analysis

Building on work completed across 2017 and 2018, this report interrogates publicly available datasets across the period 2013/14–2017/18, which have been used to provide an overview as to the numbers and entry centres of students taking A-level music. These datasets have been compared across a number of years to identify the ways in which patterns of engagement may have changed, and to help identify points of relative stability.

The second phase of the research reported here was to utilise school-level data from the National Pupil Database to understand the number of examination entries for A-Level music. Following this, the research team has then overlaid this data with POLAR (participation of local areas) data collected by HEFCE, latterly the Office of Students. The use of these two principal datasets enabled a postcode analysis of differential levels of entry to be undertaken. We then went on to consider the possible correlations between geographical trends, socio-economic characteristics, and A-level music entries.

We use these analyses to report on emerging trends, and draw some general conclusions about links between the socio-economic backgrounds of localities with low/high uptake of A-Level music and application levels to higher education.

National Pupil Database and POLAR data overlay

In order to better understand the numbers of A-level entries, the types of schools that these entries were coming from, and the historic levels of access to higher education in these areas, researchers used publicly available datasets from the National Pupil Database, provided by the Department for Education, and POLAR postcode data. POLAR data is compiled from national census data and university admissions data to give a rating of the levels of access to higher education on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating areas with the lowest levels of engagement in higher education, and 5 highlighting areas with the highest levels of university participation. Boliver et al. (2019, p. 5) note that the use of postcode-based area-level measures are reasonably reliable when used to interpret outcomes from an

area, but that these measures are not valid as indicators of the circumstances of individuals. As such, this report comments on areas of A-level music entries, patterns in the relative levels of access to A-level music from POLAR quintiles, but does not consider the individual characteristics of A-level music entrants in detail. We hope to pursue this in further research.

The following part of this analysis is based principally upon descriptive statistics from these datasets. For consistency, the POLAR 4 database was used for all datasets under consideration here.

Findings, analysis, and discussion

National Pupil Database

The National Pupil Database provides data on the number of A-level entries for all subjects and details on the examination entry centre, usually a candidate's school. Using this resource, we were able to pinpoint the number of A-level music examination entries in 2014, 2015, and 2016, and calculate the proportion of A-level entries for which it accounts.¹ From 2017 onwards, the National Pupil Database has suppressed reporting on the total entries from an individual school if this was 5 or fewer. Though for many subjects, this has had only minimal impact on the dataset, for A-level Music this has exerted a significant influence on the numbers of entry centres for which total figures are published. In 2016, the average entry size for all schools was just over 3 pupils. As such, this change in reporting means that entry data for schools in 2017 and 2018 is suppressed in around 90% of cases. However, the suppressing of these totals does not restrict the consideration of high and low areas of activity later in this analysis, but it does prevent the calculation of a total number of entries from this dataset for 2017 and 2018.

Although the granularity of the National Pupil Database dataset is better suited for the more detailed analysis that follows, a brief consideration of the A-level entry summary data provided by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) enables an indicative comparison of the relative levels of A-level music entry across the period 2011/12 to 2017/18. The JCQ figures presented in the table below include both A-level Music and A-level Music Technology, apply different counting methodologies, and are therefore different from those reported in the National Pupil Database. They do, however, illustrate the overall decline in uptake of A-level music in the last seven academic years.

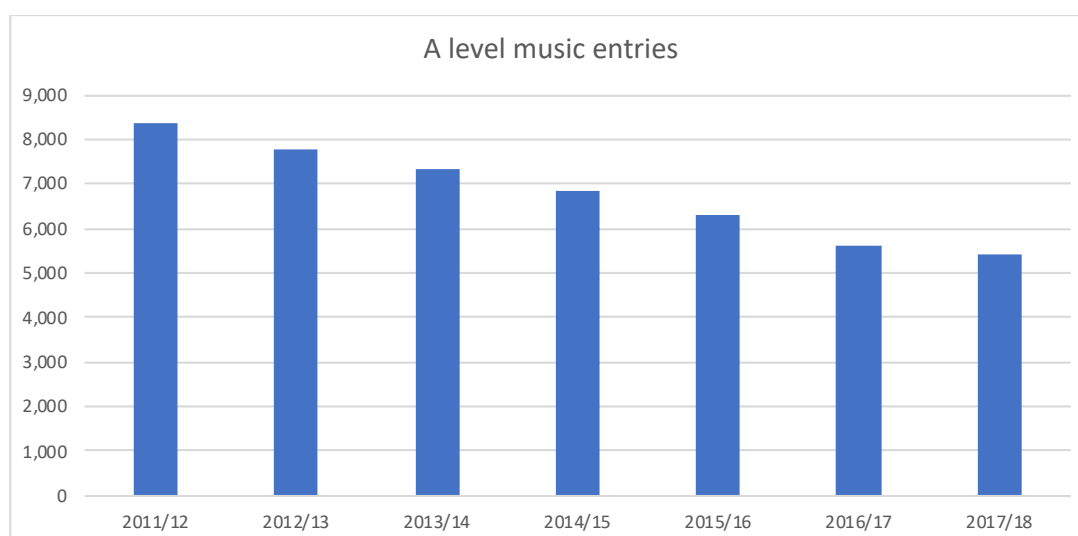
Table 1 – Entry figures from JCQ for GCE-level qualifications in music from 2011/12 to 2017/18.

Year	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Number of entries	8,369	7,793	7,353	6,820	6,293	5,610	5,440

Represented in graphical format, this reduction is clear to see:

¹ At the commencement of this study, data was not available for the 2017 entry point.

Figure 1: Bar chart of entry figures from JCQ for GCE-level qualifications in music from 2011/12 to 2017/18.



Moving on to the datasets that underpin the analysis set out in this report, it is interesting to note the overall decline in A-level music entries, and A-level entries as a whole, from 2013/14 to 2015/16.

Table 2 – Three-year comparison of the number of A-level music and A-level music technology entries – 2013/14 to 2015/16

Category	2013/14		2014/15		2015/16	
	Number of entries	% of total entries	Number of entries	% of total entries	Number of entries	% of total entries
A-level music entries	4,639	0.62%	4,432	0.60%	4,109	0.57%
A-level music technology	2,315	0.31%	2,103	0.29%	1,856	0.26%
Total A-level entries	751,085		735,069		719,231	

Across the academic years from 2013/14 to 2015/16, A-level music accounts for a little over half a per cent of the total entries at A-level, and around 0.3% of entries for A-level music technology. Both subjects saw falling entry figures across this period, with music dropping from 0.62% to 0.57% of total entries, and music technology reducing from 0.31% to 0.26% of total entries. This means that both music-related A-levels together accounted for only 0.83% of the total A-level entries in 2015/2016, compared with 0.93% in 2013/14. This constitutes a decrease in both the numbers involved and the percentage of the national population taking these qualifications. Evidence from other data sources points to similarly low numbers from 2017 and 2018 (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2018).² By comparison, in 2016 Art

² A-level Music Technology saw 1,856 entries in 2016. We are unable to deduce the proportion of students who were entered for both A-level music and A-level music technology from the available data, but analysis points towards both subjects being offered at many examination entry centres.

& Design subjects totalled 38,004 in 2016, with Art & Design (Graphics) accounting for 4,277 of these. Thus, it is interesting to see that A-level music accounts for fewer entries than one of the many subdivisions of the various Art & Design qualifications available at this level, raising important questions around the reasons for such small A-level music cohorts. Indeed, it is interesting to see that musical subjects, even though a statutory requirement of the national curriculum in earlier school phases, languishes around the same low level of entries as the subject 'Classical Civilisation', which is not statutory. Drama qualification entries saw more than the double those of A-level music in 2016. Table 3 provides a snapshot from the most recent granular data on subjects of similar entry levels to A-level music, along with other arts A-levels for comparison:

Table 3 - Number of entries for subjects of a similar size to A-level music in 2016, along with other arts subjects.

Subject	Number of entries
Art & Design (Textiles)	3,183
German	3,364
Classical Civilisation	3,595
Music	4,109
Art & Design (Graphics)	4,277
Computer Studies/Computing	5,433
Information & Communications Technology	6,092
Art & Design	6,116
Drama & Theatre Studies	11,007
Art & Design (Fine Art)	12,296
Media/Film/TV Studies	18,418

Looking at the number of centres offering A-level music, for the 2016 exam entry, 343 centres (that is, schools or colleges entering students for the A-level examination) entered students for both A-level music and A-level music technology examinations, a further 903 entered students for music A-level only, and 443 for music technology only. This means that a total of 1,246 centres offered A-level music, and 443 offered music technology. There is an overlap of 343 centres in these figures, as was noted above. There was a total of 2,847 centres offering A-levels across all subjects, meaning A-level music was offered in 43.77% of centres, and A-level music technology in 15.56%. The music offer at this level seems to be a respectable percentage, however, as we comment further below, what this means is that the average size of a music A-level group was 3.29 students, with a median average group size of 2, and a modal group size of 1 student per entry centre. For music technology the average size of a music A-level group was 4.19 students, with a median average group size of 3, and a modal group size again of 1 student.

A-level music technology involves, as we have seen, a small number of students and schools. Our main focus in this analysis is on A-level music. This is because we are interested in developing an understanding of progression routes which may be opened by A-level music into higher education, universities, conservatoires, and music colleges. Although music technology clearly plays a role in these institutions, it is the situating of A-level music as a

discrete subject upon which this report concentrates, and so it is A-level music, not music technology, to which we largely refer in this report.

The National Pupil Database also records data on the types of school entering students for specific subjects. Although a diverse range of educational institutions can be categorised under the same label, it is interesting to note the spread of entries across institution type, as shown in Table 4, and the ways in which this has changed over the last five years. We are able to report on five years of data here because this relates to the type of institution and not to the number of candidates they entered for A-level music.

Table 4 – A-level entry centres by type of school/institution³

School type	Number of centres				
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Academy 16-19 Converter	1	-	1	-	12
Academy 16-19 Sponsor Led	1	1	1	1	1
Agriculture and Horticulture College	2	1	1	2	-
Art, Design and Performing Arts College	1	-	-	1	-
City Technology College	2	2	2	2	2
Community School	129	123	103	77	71
Converter Academy	501	518	511	508	500
Foundation School	63	59	49	42	37
Free School – 16-19	-	1	2	5	6
Free School - Mainstream	1	3	2	5	5
Free School – Studio School	-	1	-	-	-
Further Education Sector Institution	21	-	-	-	-
General Further Education College	29	30	28	25	19
Independent School	327	339	340	330	315
Sixth Form Centre	1	-	-	-	-
Sixth Form Centre / Consortia	50	1	1	-	1
Sixth Form College	-	67	66	64	47
Sponsored Academy	61	60	64	58	55
Studio School	-	-	1	-	2
Tertiary College	13	11	-	-	-
University Technical College	-	-	1	-	-
Voluntary Aided School	83	73	62	64	50
Voluntary Controlled School	11	10	11	8	6
Total	1,297	1,300	1,246	1,192	1,129

³ For a description of these different types of school, see <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school> (accessed 8 June 2018).

Across the five year period there has been a drop in the number of examination centres offering A-level music. Figures have fallen from 1,297 in 2013/14 to 1,192 in 2017/18, a drop of 105 centres (8% change) of schools offering A-level music. It seems that this is a trend, and one that needs to be monitored carefully. With small cohort sizes failing to meet threshold minimums in many pressurised school timetable environments, it is likely that those schools for whom A-level music is a very small subject will be the first to axe this from their timetables. The beginnings of such decline were noted in a recent report by the Music Commission (2019, pp. 28–29), and we explore this point in more detail later on.

That said, there have been some broad points of stability. What is clear from Table 4 is that, across this five year period, the number of entry centres classified as converter academies and independent schools, has remained reasonably stable as the largest entry categories for A-level music: converter academy entry centres have fallen by a single centre; independent schools have decreased by 15 centres. The same cannot be said for sixth form colleges, which have seen a drop of 20 entry centres across the last five years, with most of this drop having occurred in 2017/18.⁴

As music is a subject supported by four highly specialised music schools, all of which are classified as independent schools in DfE data but may be classified differently by other organisations, there are a number of statistical outliers which present significantly larger cohorts of A-level music students. At this stage it is important to note that, in the National Pupil Database, many of these schools are categorised as ‘Independent’ schools, and thus contribute to the larger average entry cohort from this sector.

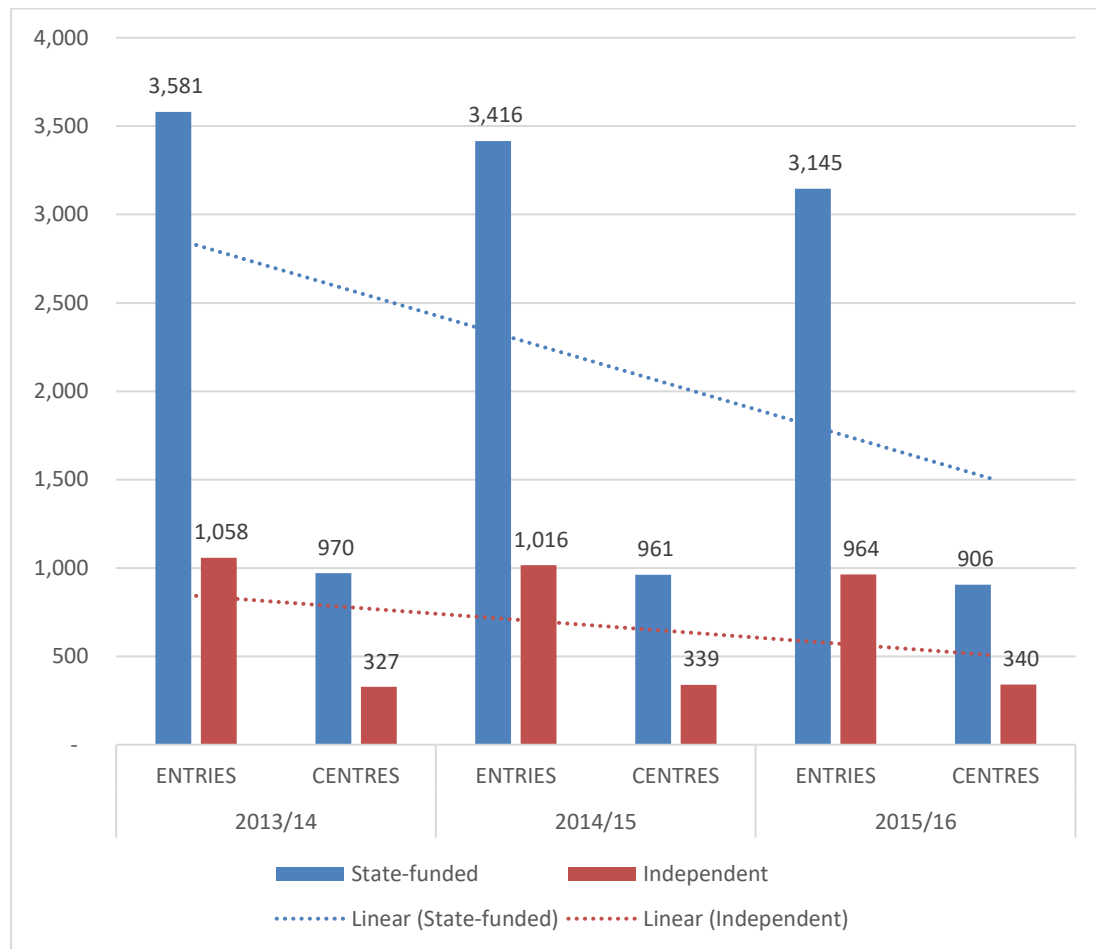
To provide a more meaningful comparison of A-level music entries across these school types, it is helpful to distil these categories into two broader brackets based upon the main funding stream. The vast majority of these school types, except for those defined as ‘independent’ schools, receive some form of state funding. When entries are divided into these two broad categories, it is interesting to see the way that entry figures have changed across the years we have data on this.

Table 5 - Comparison of independent and state school entries - 2013/14 to 2015/16

	2013/14		2014/15		2015/16	
	Entries	Centres	Entries	Centres	Entries	Centres
State-funded	3,581	970	3,416	961	3,145	906
Independent	1,058	327	1,016	339	964	340
Total	4,639	1,297	4,432	1,300	4,109	1,246

⁴ It is also possible that part of this drop might be accounted for by reclassification of some 12 Sixth Form Colleges as Academy Converter 16-19.

Figure 2 - A-level music entries from state-funded and independent schools

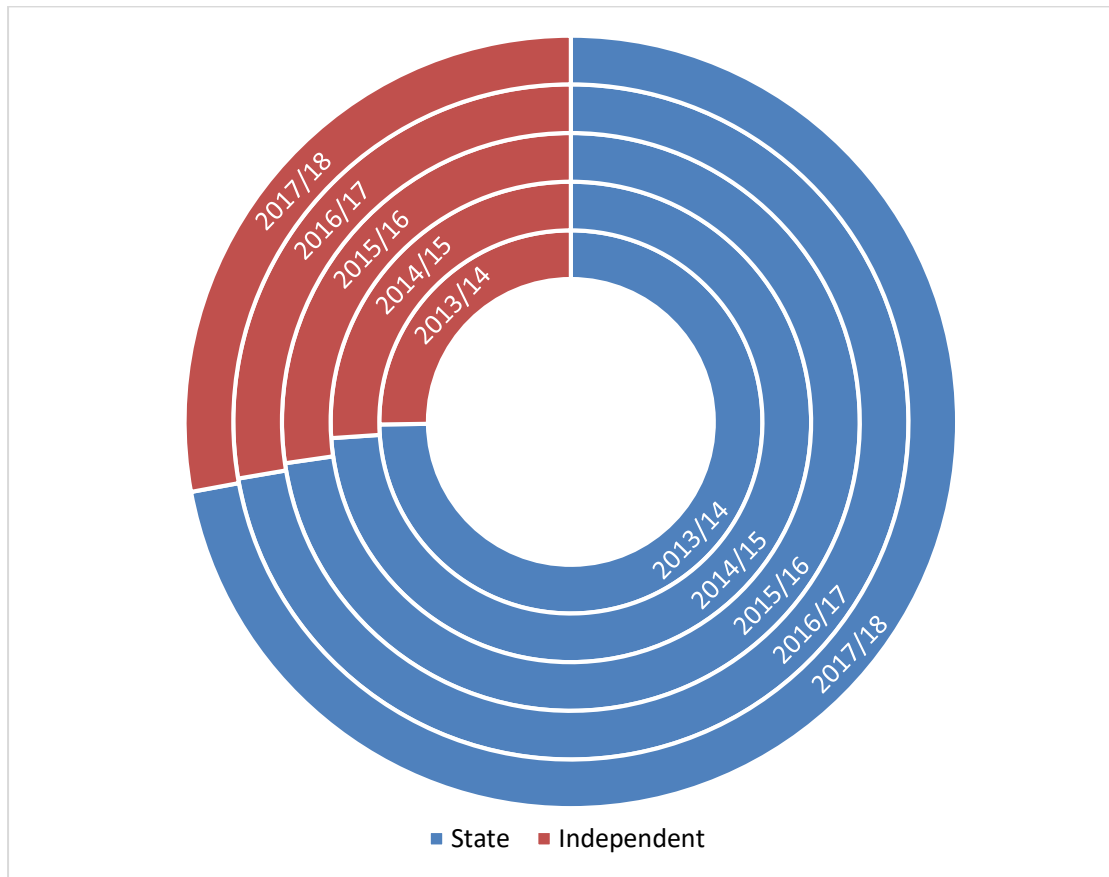


That there are a larger total number of entries from the state school sector is to be expected, given that nationally far fewer pupils attend independent schools than state-funded schools. However, it is significant that the proportion of A-level entries coming from independent schools is much higher than that which we might expect if extrapolating from the national school population. Comparing figures from the last five years shows that the proportion of entry centres has shifted slightly towards the independent sector.

Table 6 - Proportions of state/independent entry centres for A-level music from 2013/14 to 2017/18.

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

Figure 3 - Proportions of state/independent entry centres for A-level music from 2013/14 to 2017/18.



That 27.9% of A-level entry centres come from independent schools shows that the sector disproportionately accounts for entries to the system. Drawing figures from DfE’s school population figures (SFR28), the independent school population accounts for around 7% of the compulsory school age population.⁵ If we narrow this down to the 16–19 age range for Key Stage 5, the independent schools population accounts for 18.08% of the national population,⁶ still some way below the percentage of A-level music entries coming from this sector.

⁵ State population: 7,151,185; independent population: 521,992.

⁶ Based on figures in SFR28, the national population of 16-19 pupils is 506,051. 91,506 students are classified as being educated at independent schools.

Figure 4 - Proportion of A-level entry centres from state-funded and independent schools in 2017/18.

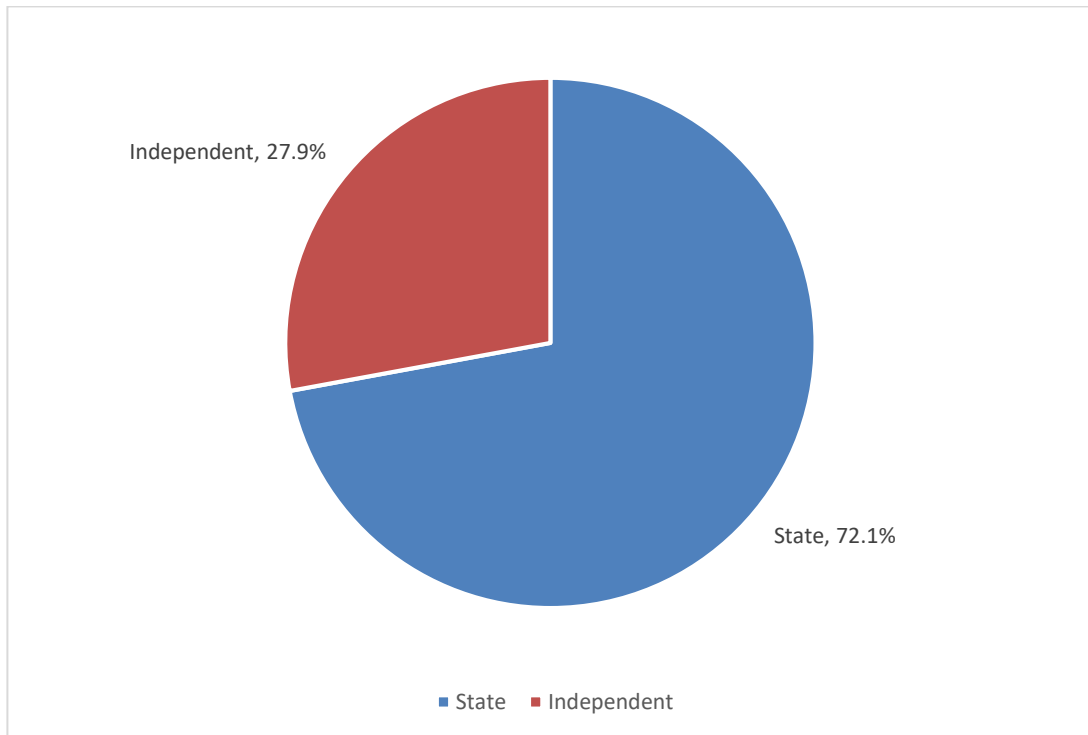


Figure 5 - Proportion of students of compulsory school age nationally from state-funded and independent schools in 2017/18.

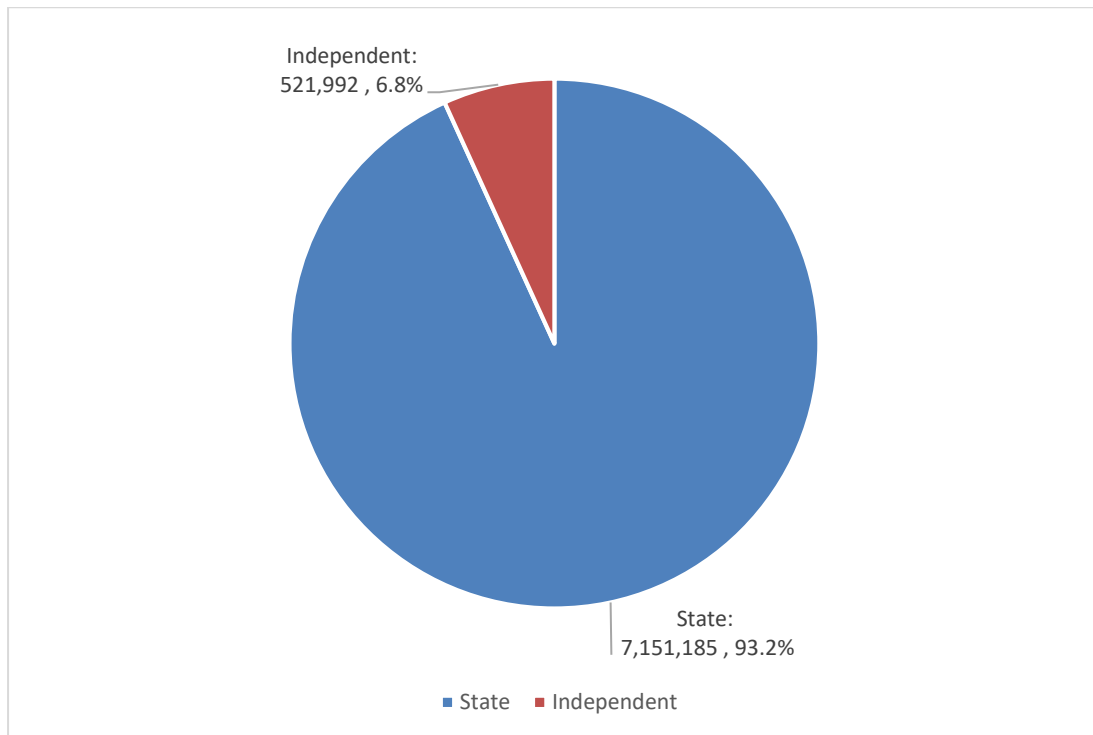


Table 5, Table 6, Figure 4, and Figure 5 show that A-level music entry centres from the independent schools sector are proportionally higher than the percentage of pupils attending independent schools nationally, where although a little under 7% of children and young people attend them, they make up around 27% of the entry centres for A-level music. Although such a comparison does not account for changes in school population size within year groups, or the number of entries made by each centre, it is indicative of a greater proportion of A-level music entries coming from within the independent school sector than might be expected if the school population at large is considered.

Local authority populations: 2016/17–2017/18

One interesting measure of engagement in A-level music that could be extracted from data in the National Pupil Database and the Schools Census is the proportion of A-level music entries in local authority A-level populations. In this part of the analysis we consider areas of low engagement in A-level, and then consider local authorities with larger numbers of A-level entries.

Areas of low engagement

2017/18

Owing to the reporting approaches from 2016/17 onwards, we are unable to comment on cases where there were fewer than five entries located in a single centre. This means that we are unable to provide an exact figure for the number of entries from this dataset. However, looking carefully at the centres which have had their totals suppressed we are able to make some conclusions. For example, we are able to be certain that fewer than five entries were made from a small number of local authorities based on their having only a single entry centre. Before exploring these areas of low entry, however, it is important to note that in 2017/18, there were four local authorities without an A-level music centre, and therefore no entries whatsoever. These were:

- Tower Hamlets
- Knowsley
- Middlesbrough
- Thurrock

Of these four, three are in 20 most deprived local authorities in the country, based on data found in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation: Knowsley is ranked 5th; Tower Hamlets 6th; and Middlesbrough 16th out of 152 local authorities. This is significant as it points towards a possible link between the most deprived areas in the country and the difficulties young people in these areas would have accessing A-level music should they wish to. Given that some of these local authority areas cover quite wide geographical regions, it would present significant challenges to any young people who might wish to take A-level music, meaning that additional travel may be involved. It also poses difficulties for providers who have to work across large geographical regions, an issue that would be compounded by the likely small group size of any advanced musical activities.

Alongside these localities without A-level music entries in 2017/18, the list below outlines local authorities with suppressed totals but only a single entry centre for A-level music. Therefore, we can be sure there were fewer than 5 entries from across the entire area in 2017/18:

- Sandwell
- City of London
- Blackpool
- Tameside
- Barnsley
- Slough
- Hartlepool
- Redcar and Cleveland
- Bury

We might infer from this that young musicians in these local authorities are likely to have greatly reduced access to A-level music, and that only a single particularly advantaged school in these areas is offering the qualification, and even then in small numbers. It is important to note that many of the areas listed above are among the most deprived localities in the country, and this raises important issues around equitable access to music education which have social justice implications. The exception to this is the City of London, whose presence on this list can be accounted for by a small number of schools being located within a local authority boundary (figures were similarly low in 2016). Again, given the large geographical area covered by some of these local authorities, it is concerning that fewer than 5 students were able to take A-level music at their school, and that only a single school in the area was able to enter students.

2016/17

Even more alarming is how similar this list of local authorities is to that from 2016/17 if the same criteria are applied. The 2016/17 list consists of:

- Sandwell
- Islington
- Blackpool
- Luton
- South Tyneside
- Rochdale
- Tameside
- Hartlepool
- Redcar and Cleveland
- St. Helens
- Halton

Again, many of these are among the most disadvantaged local authorities in the country. A comparison with 2017/18 reveals some striking similarities. Local authorities which saw only a single entry centre in both 2016/17 and 2017/18 are presented below, along with their ranking in the indices of multiple deprivation dataset which is provided in parentheses:

- Blackpool (4)
- Hartlepool (28)
- Redcar and Cleveland (55)
- Sandwell (12)
- Tameside (29)

This is significant, especially as some of these also feature on similar lists for data from 2015/16. This raises an important question of equality of access to music education, especially at advanced levels, in schools in these localities. Whilst A-level music is only one of many qualifications young people might engage with in the 16–18 phase, it is significant that the entries from all of these local authorities combined account for less than a quarter of those coming from specialist music schools, of which there are only four such institutions in the country.

Areas of high engagement

2017/18

Although data for centres of low entry are suppressed, totals for larger entry centres (those with more than 5 entries) are not. We are therefore able to comment with some specificity on local authorities with higher levels of entry, especially where these are concentrated in a small number of schools. The figures reported in Table 7 include only those entries which are recorded in the National Pupil Database, so any centres with 5 or fewer entries have been discounted from these calculations.

Table 7 - 15 local authorities with the highest numbers of reported entries for A-level music in 2017/18

Local authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres
Manchester	115	4
Hampshire	105	5
Essex	62	7
Hertfordshire	60	8
Surrey	60	6
Somerset	51	2
Cambridgeshire	49	3
Wigan	46	2
Northamptonshire	35	3
Suffolk	33	5
Shropshire	32	2
Brighton and Hove	26	2
Kirklees	25	1
Buckinghamshire	25	3
Cornwall	24	2

What is significant about the data presented in Table 7 is that a large number of entries are accounted for by a relatively small number of schools, providing evidence of the exclusive nature of A-level music to a small number of schools. Although the local authorities listed differ slightly from those presented in discussions of data from 2013/14 to 2015/16, it is significant that areas surrounding major cities, especially London and Manchester, are represented here. However, there are local authorities which, in other parts of the analysis, appear to represent lower levels of entries, showing that entries in these areas are located in a very small number of schools. This is significant. If a young musician does not attend one of these schools, maybe because they live too far away, or they lack the means to gain a place, then they are likely to be excluded from the possibility of being entered for A-level music. This presents a significant challenge to addressing diversity of access across the music and music education sectors.

2016/17

Applying the same criteria to data from 2016/17 reveals some interesting points of overlap, and also some significant points of difference.

Table 8 - 15 local authorities with the highest numbers of reported entries for A-level music in 2016/17.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres
Manchester	111	3
Hampshire	107	7
Hertfordshire	101	9
Somerset	62	3
Surrey	57	4
Wigan	42	2
Cambridgeshire	37	3
Kirklees	36	2
Buckinghamshire	36	5
Essex	34	3
Camden	33	4
Gloucestershire	30	4
Lancashire	25	3
Suffolk	25	4
Herefordshire, County of	24	1

Manchester is again at the top of this listing, with over 100 A-level music entries. Although Hertfordshire is near the top of tables for both 2016/17 and 2017/18, it has seen its entry numbers fall from 101 to 60 in 2017/18. This likely points either towards a number of schools falling just below the threshold for their figures to be suppressed, or the withdrawal of A-level music from a large centre of entry. Of these, the former seems most likely. Again it is significant that a number of these local authorities are located close to major cities, or contain a specialist music school, raising further questions concerning equality of access across the country. A case in point would be the North East of England, which is not represented in either list.

Comparing 2016/17 and 2017/18 data

The similarity between Table 7 and Table 8 is significant and points toward relative stability in the areas with particularly high levels of A-level music entry. Comparing these lists reveals that 11 of the 15 local authorities listed on both are identical. Rankings from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (1=most deprived; 152=least deprived) have been provided in brackets following the local authority description:

- Manchester (5)
- Hampshire (141)
- Hertfordshire (138)
- Somerset (110)
- Surrey (150)
- Wigan (63)
- Cambridgeshire (134)
- Kirklees (69)
- Buckinghamshire (148)
- Essex (113)
- Suffolk (102)

With the exception of Manchester, it is significant that most of these local authorities are not to be found in the lowest quintile of deprivation in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, meaning that these are among the most affluent local authorities from the 152 local authorities listed in this dataset. This is significant. There is a clear correlation between the most advantaged areas and high levels of A-level music entry, with this being borne out across the historic data considered later in this report. This is not to suggest that high quality musical activity is totally absent for 16-19 year olds in local authorities with low levels of entry, rather that young people from the most affluent local authorities seem to be disproportionately represented in A-level entry figures. Such a finding chimes with a recent report which identified costs of instrumental lessons as prohibitively expensive for those experiencing disadvantage (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education et al., 2019, p. 20).

Local authority populations: 2013/14–2015/16

Areas of low engagement

2015/16

As has been discussed above, historic data dating back from 2015/16 does not suppress the total number of A-level entries when a centre has five or fewer candidates. As such, we are able to pinpoint local authorities with low levels of entry and provide a total numbers of entries for each year. The fifteen local authorities with the lowest levels of A-level entry are provided below, arranged from the lowest numbers of entry:

Table 9 - Lowest levels of A-level music entry by local authority in 2015/16.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of centres	Average POLAR of entry centres ⁷
Tower Hamlets	1	1	3.00
Islington	1	1	5.00
South Tyneside	1	1	2.00
Thurrock	1	1	1.00
Halton	1	1	1.00
Sandwell	2	2	2.00
City of London	2	1	5.00
Barnsley	2	1	5.00
Derby	3	2	5.00
Salford	4	1	2.00
Torbay	4	2	3.00
Hartlepool	4	1	1.00
Brent	5	3	4.33
Barking and Dagenham	5	2	3.00
Hounslow	5	4	4.50
Warrington	5	3	3.67

The data presented in Table 9 raises important questions around the scope of provision in many local authorities. It is concerning that, even in some large local authorities, only a single school entered A-level music candidates in 2015/16. It should also be noted that there were four local authorities in England without an A-level music student in 2016. These were:

- Knowsley
- Middlesbrough
- Redcar and Cleveland
- St Helens

⁷ In the tables that follow, POLAR ratings have been colour coded on a scale of red (1) to green (5). This is to aid easy identification of the concentration of POLAR ratings in these local authorities.

All of these local authorities also saw very low, or no entries at all, in 2016/17 and 2017/18, pointing to systemic issues and challenges concerning A-level music entry. Importantly, these local authorities sit in regions with widespread low levels of A-level music entry, especially from state-funded settings. From these data alone, we cannot disentangle the myriad possible reasons behind this, but conversations with local MEHs and music organisations might yield an insight into the kinds of targeted support that would be most effective in these areas.

Proportions of entries from state schools – 2015/16

As publicly available data is more specific up to 2015/16, we are able to comment on local authorities with low levels of entries from state schools in greater detail. It should be noted from the outset that the reporting of independent school numbers is not necessarily consistent in the Schools Census as independent schools are not obliged to provide such data. Table 10 draws attention to some of the local authorities with the lowest proportion of state-funded A-level entries from the local authority school population.

Table 10 - Low levels of state-funded A-level entry as proportion of local authority school A-level population

Local Authority	Entries	Centres	POLAR rating ⁸	State-funded entries	% of entries state-funded	% music entries from LA state student popn
Kensington & Chelsea	8	4	5.00	0	0.00%	0.00%
Portsmouth	7	1	3.00	0	0.00%	0.00%
Rutland	8	1	5.00	0	0.00%	0.00%
Islington	1	1	5.00	1	100.00%	0.12%
Tower Hamlets	1	1	4.00	1	100.00%	0.12%
Thurrock	1	1	2.00	1	100.00%	0.19%
Derby	3	2	5.00	2	66.67%	0.26%
Sandwell	2	2	2.00	2	100.00%	0.31%
Hounslow	5	4	4.25	4	80.00%	0.37%
South Tyneside	1	1	3.00	1	100.00%	0.37%
Halton	1	1	1.00	1	100.00%	0.39%
Leicester	6	3	4.33	6	100.00%	0.44%
Richmond upon Thames	22	8	4.50	3	13.64%	0.48%
Brent	5	3	4.67	5	100.00%	0.50%
Waltham Forest	7	4	3.75	5	71.43%	0.50%

⁸ In this, and similar tables, average POLAR rating is achieved by averaging all of the postcodes where schools had entered students within their local area, hence the use of decimal points.

What is clear from Table 10 is that low-levels of state-funded A-level music entry do not necessarily occur in POLAR areas rated at the lower end of the scale, a point returned to later in this report. The case of Richmond upon Thames provides a useful example, where there is a total of 22 A-level music entries, only 3 of which come from state-funded schools. This means that, for this local authority, over 85% of A-level music entries come from the independent school sector, and that state-funded A-level music students account for less than 0.5% of the general state-funded A-level population for the local authority. A similar trend is visible in Kensington and Chelsea, where there were no state-funded A-level music entries in the local authority, despite there being 6 secondary schools there, 4 of which have sixth forms. This raises important questions about access to state-funded A-level music, even in areas with high POLAR ratings, and points towards issues that extend beyond neighbourhood geography.

2014/15

Many of the local authorities presented in tables above also appear in the areas of lowest entry for A-level music in 2014/15. As before, there were sixteen local authorities which saw five or fewer entries.

Table 11 - Lowest levels of A-level music entry by local authority in 2014/15.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres	Average POLAR of entry centre
South Tyneside	1	1	2.00
Islington	2	2	4.50
Middlesbrough	2	1	1.00
Blackpool	3	1	2.00
Brent	3	2	5.00
Sunderland	3	2	1.50
Hartlepool	3	1	1.00
Tower Hamlets	4	2	3.00
Hackney	4	3	3.67
Rutland	4	1	5.00
Sandwell	5	3	2.33
Blackburn with Darwen	5	2	3.00
Newham	5	1	4.00
Barking and Dagenham	5	2	3.00
Torbay	5	3	3.33
Halton	5	2	1.00

What this table shows is that there are a significant number of local authorities which, based on current class size thresholds in many schools – we have heard from music teachers anecdotally that these are often set between 5 and 10 students – would not be able to justify continuing support for A-level music. For example, Hackney saw 4 entries from 3 schools, meaning that class sizes consisted of either 1 or 2 students. Such small class sizes would be deemed unviable in some contexts, and may not be present in the most recent data, highlighting concerns around the opportunity for all young people to access A-level music should they wish to. It is also significant that the average POLAR ratings of the neighbourhoods of the schools entering A-level music students in these local authorities is quite often lower than those in local authorities entering larger numbers of students.

Proportion of entries from state school – 2014/15

Drilling into these data in more detail reveals some interesting findings regarding the proportions of entries from state schools. The table below presents the local authorities with the lowest proportion of A-level music entries from the state education sector.

What is particularly noticeable about the data presented in Table 12 is that the average POLAR ratings of the entry centres in these local authorities is much higher than that in Table 11. Independent schools are also overly represented in many local authorities. This is an important finding as it demonstrates that in some local authorities, entries from independent schools account for more than half of the A-level music entries coming from that area. As we have seen above, given that the independent sector accounts for around 7% of the national school population, and just under 20% of the 16-19 population, entries from independent schools are disproportionately high for A-level music. Also as noted previously, in a few cases, the low levels of state-funded entry can be accounted for by a local authority being very small and containing few state-funded schools. For example, the City of London local authority does not contain any state-funded secondary schools or sixth-form colleges. By contrast, Somerset contains 44 state-funded secondary schools and 6 further education institutions. Thus, care must be taken to consider these figures within a local context. However, it is clear that the independent sector is particularly prevalent in the A-level music entries for some local authorities.

Table 12 - Low proportions of state-funded A-level music entry in 2014/15, arranged by local authority.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres	Average POLAR of entry centres	State-funded entries	% of entries state-funded
Merton	9	2	5.00	0	0.00%
City of London	7	2	5.00	0	0.00%
Rutland	4	1	5.00	0	0.00%
Portsmouth	7	4	4.25	1	14.29%
Richmond upon Thames	25	5	5.00	5	20.00%
Kensington and Chelsea	11	7	5.00	3	27.27%
Derby	7	3	4.67	2	28.57%
Somerset	85	17	3.00	26	30.59%
Hammersmith and Fulham	24	5	5.00	9	37.50%
Bedford	16	7	4.14	6	37.50%
Manchester	119	9	4.13	45	37.82%
Waltham Forest	10	3	4.00	4	40.00%
Blackburn with Darwen	5	2	3.00	2	40.00%
Reading	22	7	3.67	9	40.91%
Hounslow	9	5	4.80	4	44.44%
Bath and North East Somerset	34	13	4.00	18	52.94%
Bracknell Forest	11	4	4.00	6	54.55%
Croydon	40	12	4.58	22	55.00%
Southwark	18	6	4.67	10	55.56%
Haringey	17	5	5.00	10	58.82%

2013/14

The earliest dataset under consideration here comes from 2013/14. Whilst much of what is presented in the tables below serves to further confirm the trends set out above, it is interesting to observe and consider the points of overlap and difference more carefully.

Table 13 – Lowest levels of A-level music entry by local authority in 2013/14.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres	Average POLAR of entry centre
South Tyneside	1	1	2.00
Barnsley	1	1	5.00
Newham	2	1	4.00
Torbay	3	3	3.67
Hartlepool	3	1	1.00
North Lincolnshire	4	1	2.00
Salford	4	1	2.00
Plymouth	4	4	2.50
Bracknell Forest	5	3	3.50
Blackburn with Darwen	5	3	4.33
Sandwell	5	3	3.00
Tameside	5	3	3.00
Barking and Dagenham	5	3	3.00
Thurrock	5	1	1.00
Redcar and Cleveland	5	2	3.50
Middlesbrough	5	3	2.33
Halton	5	1	1.00

As with data from 2014/15 and 2015/16, the average POLAR ratings of these entry centres are quite low, with most falling below the 4 or 5 quintiles. It is noteworthy that many of the same local authorities appear in Table 13 as in Table 9 and Table 11, suggesting that there are longer-term and systemic issues in sustaining A-level music in some of these localities. It is also significant that some local authorities that appear on this list have reached a point where they were without A-level music entries, or only had a single entry centre, in 2017/18. Examples include Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Sandwell. This is significant as it might provide evidence of instances where A-level music has ceased to become available in some of the most deprived local authorities in the country, pointing to serious concerns about sustainability more widely. Such a conclusion has important social justice implications for aspiring young musicians in these regions, and for the diversity of the music sector as a whole. Without aspiring young musicians in these localities, conservatoires are unlikely to be able to recruit future students from these regions and diversify the musical workforce locally, regionally, and nationally.

Proportion of entries from state school – 2013/14

Whilst low levels of entry are indicative of decreased engagement with, and access to, A-level music, it is also important to consider the proportion of entries coming from the state and independent sectors.

Table 14 – Low proportions of state-funded A-level music entry in 2013/14, arranged by local authority.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres	Average POLAR	State-funded entries	% of entries state-funded
City of London	10	2	5.00	0	0.00%
Portsmouth	13	3	5.00	0	0.00%
Rutland	6	2	5.00	1	16.67%
Bracknell Forest	5	3	3.50	1	20.00%
Richmond upon Thames	15	5	5.00	3	20.00%
Derby	7	3	4.67	2	28.57%
Manchester	105	8	4.14	33	31.43%
Somerset	104	16	3.08	38	36.54%
Southwark	22	6	4.67	9	40.91%
Reading	18	6	4.00	8	44.44%
Westminster	26	9	5.00	12	46.15%
Croydon	35	11	4.73	17	48.57%
Waltham Forest	14	4	4.00	7	50.00%
Bedford	25	7	3.71	13	52.00%
Bolton	26	5	3.80	14	53.85%

As noted in relation to data from 2015/16 and 2014/15, it is important to acknowledge that some local authorities have a low proportion of state-funded entries simply by virtue of having only a small number of state schools in their boundaries. This is particularly true of some London boroughs, which often cover relatively small geographical areas. However, it is significant that, even with this in mind, some large local authorities see a relatively low proportion of their entries for A-level music coming from state schools. This is especially true of local authorities covering large cities and towns which see fewer than 50% of their A-level music entries coming from the state-funded sector. It is also noteworthy that the average POLAR ratings of the postcodes of these is significantly higher than those in Table 13, though the small number of entry centres means that each POLAR rating significantly skews the average. That said, considered alongside the data presented across 2013/14–2015/16, it would seem that there is something of a correlation between POLAR 4 and 5 ratings, and higher levels of A-level music entry.

Areas of high engagement

With areas of lower levels of engagement having been considered for the period 2013/14 to 2015/16, it is important to explore those local authorities which have seen consistently high levels of engagement in A-level music.

2015/16

In 2015/16 there were six local authorities which fielded more than 100 A-level music entries, and a total of 21 who entered more than 50 candidates. The table below presents the 15 local authorities with the largest number of entries in 2015/16.

Table 15 - 15 local authorities with the largest number of A-level music entries in 2015/16.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of centres	Average POLAR rating of entry centres	Average cohort size
Hertfordshire	226	63	4.48	3.59
Surrey	162	43	4.66	3.77
Hampshire	153	18	3.13	8.50
Essex	109	32	3.81	3.41
Somerset	106	17	3.08	6.24
Manchester	103	7	4.00	14.71
Kent	82	39	3.49	2.10
Gloucestershire	79	29	3.48	2.72
Oxfordshire	74	25	4.50	2.96
North Yorkshire	70	21	4.00	3.33
Lancashire	68	17	3.81	4.00
Northamptonshire	68	25	3.24	2.72
Lincolnshire	64	22	2.77	2.91
Cambridgeshire	59	11	4.10	5.36
Staffordshire	57	20	3.15	2.85

Table 15 highlights the concentration of large numbers of A-level music entries in a small number of local authorities. These 15 local authorities account for 1,480 entries, some 36% of the 4,109 total A-level entries made in 2015/16. It is significant that the average POLAR ratings of these entry centres are almost all above 3, meaning that these local authorities see their entries come from centres in neighbourhoods with high levels of access to higher education. It is also noteworthy that the four local authorities with the most entries are

located within close proximity to London. Indeed, only a small number of the local authorities listed in Table 15 are from north of Birmingham.

A point of variation across these local authorities is the average cohort size. Although subject to the influence of outliers, especially in instances where only a small number of entry centres are recorded, it seems significant that the average class size for many of the entry centres in these local authorities does not exceed the national average of 3.3 students. What this means is that, in many of these local authorities, A-level music is being maintained in relatively small groups across a number of entry centres. Thus, it is important to question why these schools are able to sustain A-level music when it is disappearing from the curricula of schools in more deprived areas.

2014/15

Applying the same process to data from 2014/15 provides an interesting point of comparison with 2015/16 data.

Table 16 - 15 local authorities with the largest number of A-level music entries in 2014/15.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres	Average POLAR	Average cohort size
Hertfordshire	233	63	4.43	3.70
Hampshire	165	19	3.28	8.68
Surrey	151	39	4.68	3.87
Essex	126	27	3.89	4.67
Kent	121	43	3.60	2.81
Manchester	119	9	4.13	13.22
Oxfordshire	99	32	4.30	3.09
Somerset	85	17	3.00	5.00
Lancashire	80	18	3.76	4.44
North Yorkshire	77	23	3.95	3.35
West Sussex	76	25	3.38	3.04
Leicestershire	72	17	3.59	4.24
Lincolnshire	72	24	2.46	3.00
Northamptonshire	70	22	3.41	3.18
Suffolk	68	22	3.40	3.09

It is clear that the entry figures from these 15 local authorities are generally higher than in 2015/16, with six local authorities having entered more than 100 candidates for A-level music in 2014/15. These 15 local authorities accounted for 1,614 of the 4,432 entries made in the 2014/15 academic year, 36.42% of the total entries. This is comparable with the proportion of entries reported in 2015/16, and shows that a decrease in the number of entries has not changed the distribution of these entries. It is significant that the top 4 positions in this table are identical to data from 2015/16, suggesting that these local authorities have long-established traditions of A-level music entries across their locality.

Again, there is some variation in the average cohort size in these local authorities, likely influenced heavily by the presence of specialist music schools and other outliers within these local authority boundaries. Nationally, the average cohort size for 2014/15 was 3.41 students, and the averages in Table 16 demonstrate that many of these local authorities are broadly in line with the national picture in terms of their cohort size, especially when outliers are discounted.

2013/14

A similar picture is painted in data from 2013/14, with the same four local authorities being securely located at the top of the entry figures. The number of entries in the top 15 local authorities is slightly higher than in later years due to the overall decline in entries across the last five years.

Table 17 – 15 local authorities with the largest number of A-level music entries in 2013/14.

Local Authority	Number of entries	Number of entry centres	Average POLAR of entry centre	Average cohort size
Hertfordshire	228	65	4.51	3.51
Hampshire	186	22	3.10	8.45
Surrey	149	42	4.68	3.55
Kent	114	38	3.50	3.00
Essex	114	27	4.00	4.22
Manchester	105	8	4.14	13.13
Somerset	104	16	3.08	6.50
West Sussex	88	24	3.25	3.67
Gloucestershire	88	25	3.32	3.52
Oxfordshire	87	33	4.36	2.64
Staffordshire	76	26	3.00	2.92
North Yorkshire	76	24	3.91	3.17
Suffolk	71	25	3.22	2.84
Lincolnshire	70	25	2.60	2.80
Leicestershire	69	18	3.56	3.83

The local authorities listed in Table 17 account for 1,625 of the 4,639 entries in 2013/14, 35.03% of the total entries for that academic year, a slightly lower proportion than seen in 2014/15 and 2015/16. It is also noteworthy that seven local authorities were able to enter more than 100 candidates from their local authority, which is striking when compared with the very low levels of entry from other parts of the country. It is significant too that these high numbers of entries are often distributed across multiple centres of entry, meaning that a number of schools were likely maintaining reasonably small groups of students in these areas. Again, it is clear that small groups can be, and are being, sustained in some schools across the country.

Comparison across 2013/14–2015/16

It is clear from the tables presented above that A-level music entries are not evenly geographically distributed, with a small number of local authorities entering more students for A-level music than some regions of the country. As such, it is interesting to identify the local authorities which have featured in the tables of highest entry across this three-year period. There are 10 local authorities which appeared in the top 15 local authorities for A-level entry across 2013/14–2015/16, and these are:

- Hertfordshire
- Hampshire
- Surrey
- Kent
- Essex
- Manchester
- Somerset
- Oxfordshire
- North Yorkshire
- Lincolnshire

The relative stability of high levels of entry across three years from a small number of local authorities is an important finding, and one that draws attention to what can be seen as deep inequality in access to A-level music across the country. Clearly, A-level music is embedded into the fabric of many schools in these local authorities. It seems highly unlikely that there are so few potential A-level music candidates in some local authorities, and thus there appears to be something of a correlation between the relative advantaged or disadvantaged status of a local authority and its ability to sustain A-level music across a diverse range of schools. This is an important finding regarding the future diversity of the music sector, especially as A-level music still holds a gatekeeping function to some higher music institutions.

POLAR Data

Having established the context using statistics drawn from the National Pupil Database with general remarks on the distribution of entries in relation to POLAR ratings, the next part of this analysis explores the ways in which POLAR data can be overlaid onto these findings in a more specific sense at both a national and regional level. POLAR data provides classifications of levels of engagement in higher education for most postcodes across the UK. It was used in this study to understand the socio-economic context of specific postcode areas. It offers an insight into the access to higher education in postcode areas, but does not necessarily provide detailed insight into specific individuals in these postcodes. Along with this information, key data were drawn from the annual schools census to enable comparisons between levels of local authority engagement in A-level music as a proportion of their respective school populations.

National picture: 2017/18 and 2016/17

The first aspect of this analysis explores the national distribution of A-level music examination centre postcodes and the POLAR ratings associated with these postcodes. Although school postcodes do not necessarily give an accurate picture of the populations which attend a specific institution, they are broadly indicative of the socio-economic characteristics of the school and its immediate surroundings. Again, we are unable to comment on the individual characteristics of the specific A-level music entrants. Due to the change in the detail of data published in public extracts from DfE, data from 2016/17 and 2017/18 will be treated separately from those of 2013/14 to 2015/16. By overlaying the data set out above, it is clear that a significant majority of A-level music entries from centres entering more than 5 students are located in those areas with the highest POLAR ratings.

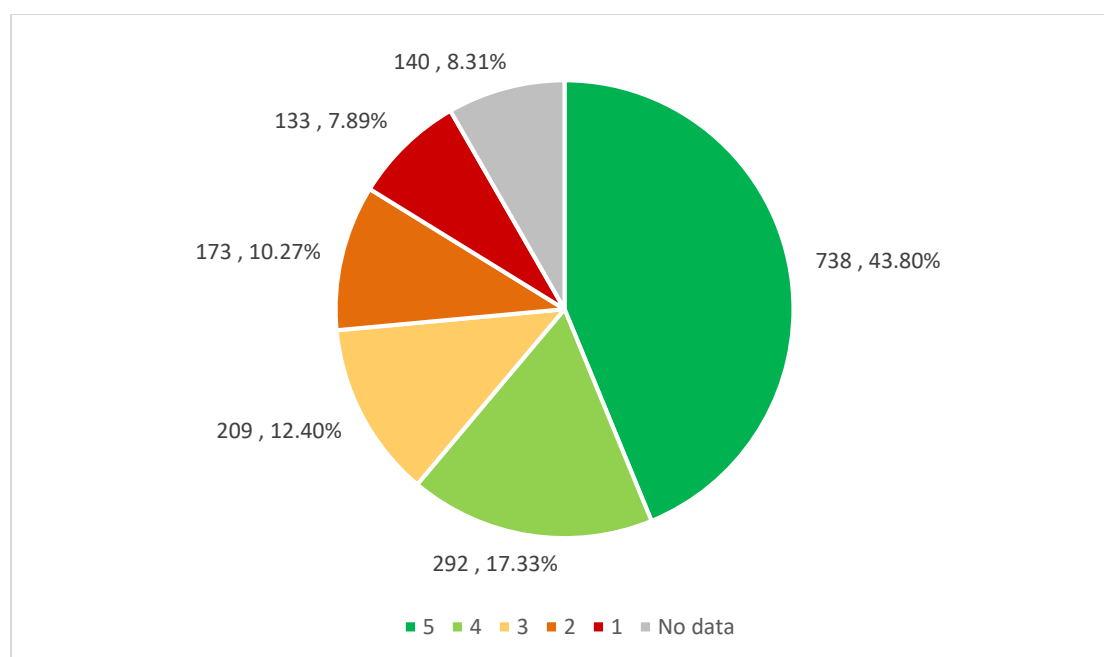
2017/18

Table 18 - Distribution of A-level music entries from entry centres with more than 5 A-level music students by POLAR rating in 2017/18

Region - POLAR	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Regional Total
East Midlands & Humber	24	27	10	9	28	-	98
East of England & North East London	126	42	17	12	12	-	209
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	34	57	90	48	29	67	325
North	57	7	12	13	-	-	89
South Central & North West London	138	79	21	16	8	9	271
South East & South London	202	23	26	46	10	14	321
South West	67	25	13	29	26	50	210
West Midlands	90	32	20	-	20	-	162
Total Entries	738	292	209	173	133	140	1,685

The table above suggests that there is something of a North/South divide in the number of entries, with regions located closer to London accounting for a large number of the A-level entries from centres entering more than 5 candidates. It also demonstrates that these entry centres are located overwhelmingly in the upper POLAR ratings, with POLAR 5 postcodes accounting for 43.8% of entries which meet the reporting threshold. This highlights an important issue regarding the parity of A-level music provision across different socio-economic areas of the country.

Figure 6 - Distribution of A-level music entries from centres with more than 5 students by POLAR rating in 2017/18



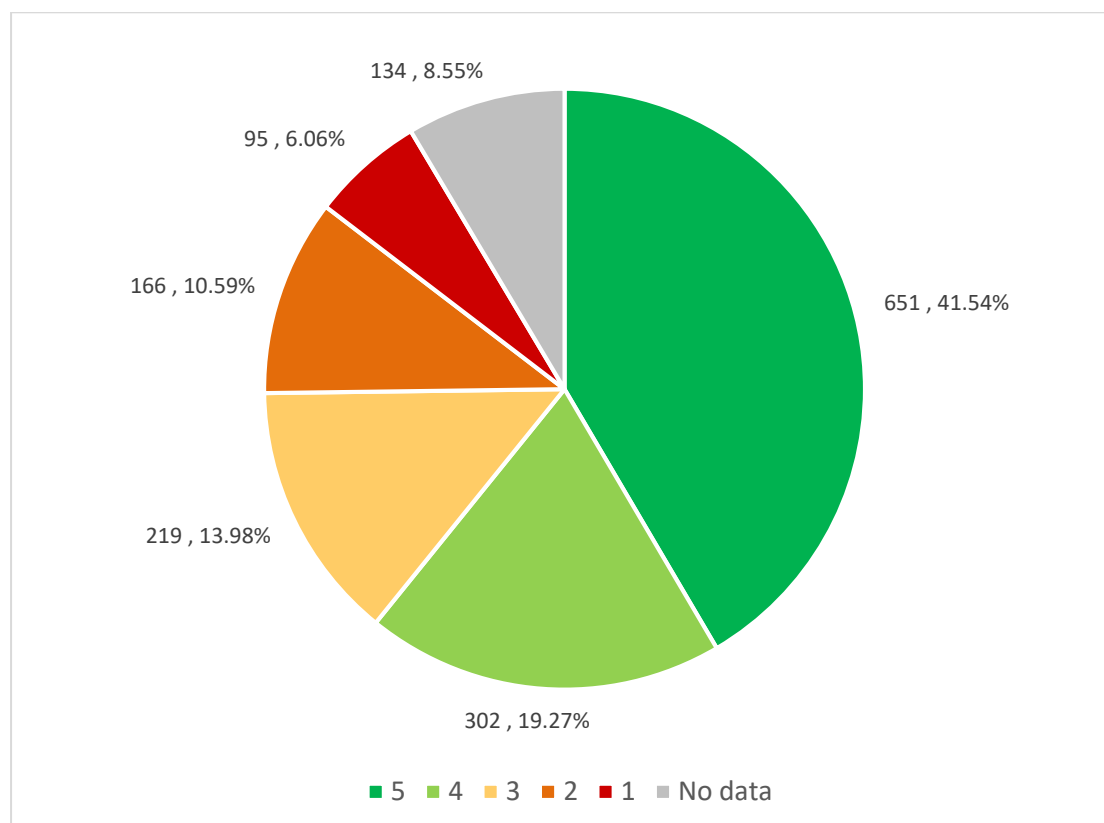
2016/17

A similar distribution of A-level entries from centres with more than 5 students can also be observed from 2016/17, both in terms of regions and POLAR ratings.

Table 19 - Distribution of A-level music entries from entry centres with more than 5 A-level music students by POLAR rating in 2016/17.

Region - POLAR	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Regional Total
East Midlands & Humber	34	51	6	13	20	-	124
East of England & North East London	101	6	18	13	12	6	156
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	-	65	90	52	18	73	298
North	30	8	7	18	-	-	63
South Central & North West London	170	72	25	7	9	-	283
South East & South London	173	31	16	50	14	8	292
South West	65	37	41	6	22	47	218
West Midlands	78	32	16	7	-	-	133
Total Entries	651	302	219	166	95	134	1,567

Figure 7 - Distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2016/17.

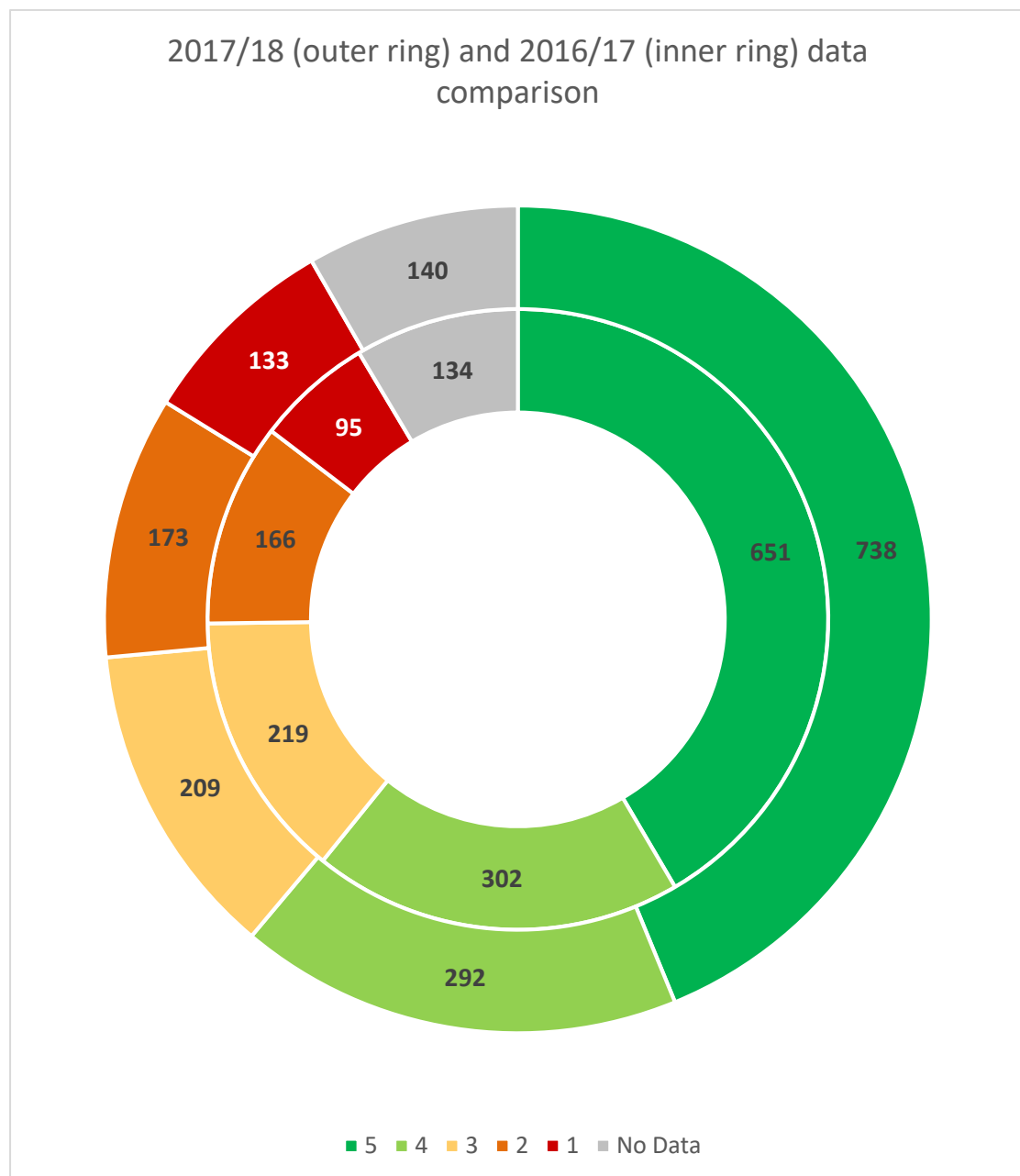


Although the total number of entries listed in Table 19 appears to be slightly lower than figures for 2017/18, it is worth restating that these figures account only for those entry centres where an examination centre entered more than 5 candidates. Given the overall decline in A-level entries indicated in figures from JCQ (see Table 1), what we might infer from this is that A-level entries are becoming slightly more concentrated in centres of existing high entry. As many of these centres are located in especially affluent areas, this points to a significant problem in potential A-level music candidates being unable to access this qualification simply because they lack the means or transport to attend a centre where A-level music is offered. This might also point towards A-level music becoming more concentrated in a smaller number of schools in a locality, raising important questions around the continuing place and sustainability of A-level music in the state sector.

2016/17–2017/18 data comparison

It is interesting to observe the ways in which entry numbers from larger entry centres have changed between 2016/17 and 2017/18, especially around the distribution of entries by POLAR rating. As is clear from the chart below, entries from POLAR 5 postcodes accounted for a greater of those reported in 2017/18 than in 2016/17. There is also a slight increase in the number of entries reported from POLAR 1 postcodes. Other POLAR classifications remained largely stable across this two year period amongst the entry centres for which we have precise figures.

Figure 8 - Comparison of the distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating - 2016/17 and 2017/18.



2013/14–2015/16

Owing to the different reporting methods from 2016/17, data from before this point will be treated separately. The analysis of data from 2016/17–2017/18 only reports on data from entry centres with more than five students. Data for 2013/14 – 2015/16 permits a full consideration of all entries made from in the relevant academic year, irrespective of group size. However, general trends across the five-year time period can still be identified.

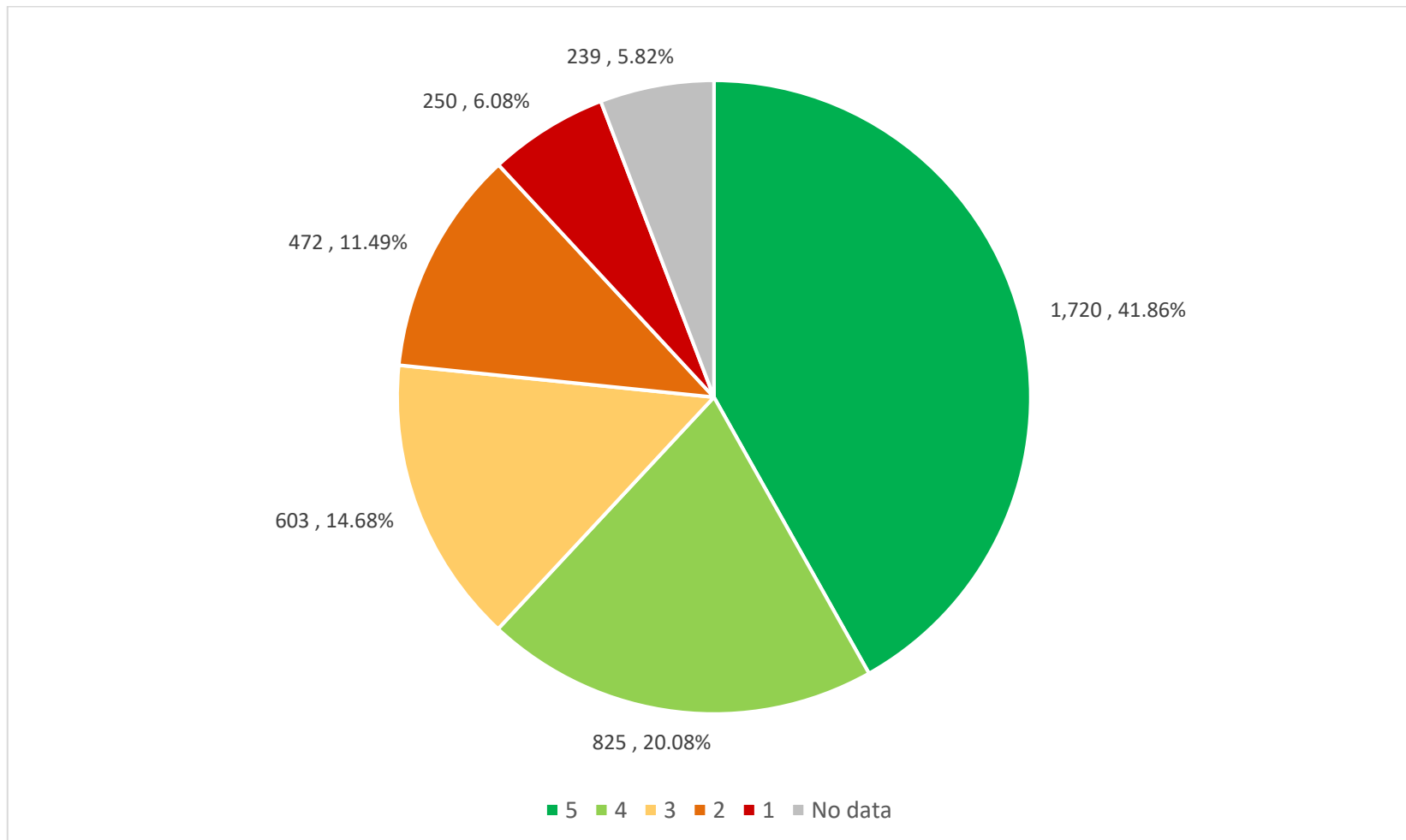
2015/16

Table 20 - Distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2015/16.

POLAR rating	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Total
Total A-Level Music Entries	1,720	825	603	472	250	239	4,109

Table 20 demonstrates clearly that a significant portion of all A-level music entries are associated with schools in postcodes with the highest POLAR rating. Indeed, if the entries in POLAR areas rated as 4 or 5 are considered together, they account for well over half of all the A-level music entries. This trend accords with that observed in data from 2016/17 and 2017/18. We might infer from this that a significant majority of A-level music entries are associated with schools in areas with the highest levels of socio-economic advantage. Contrasted with the 6.08% of entries associated with POLAR 1 postcodes, the picture is stark and points towards socio-economic disadvantage being an indicator of low-uptake in A-level music.

Figure 9 - Graphical representation of the distribution of A-level entries by POLAR rating in 2015/16.



Regional picture

Indeed, further detail emerges from an analysis of the overlay of regional entry figures with POLAR ratings, the results of which can be seen in the table below.

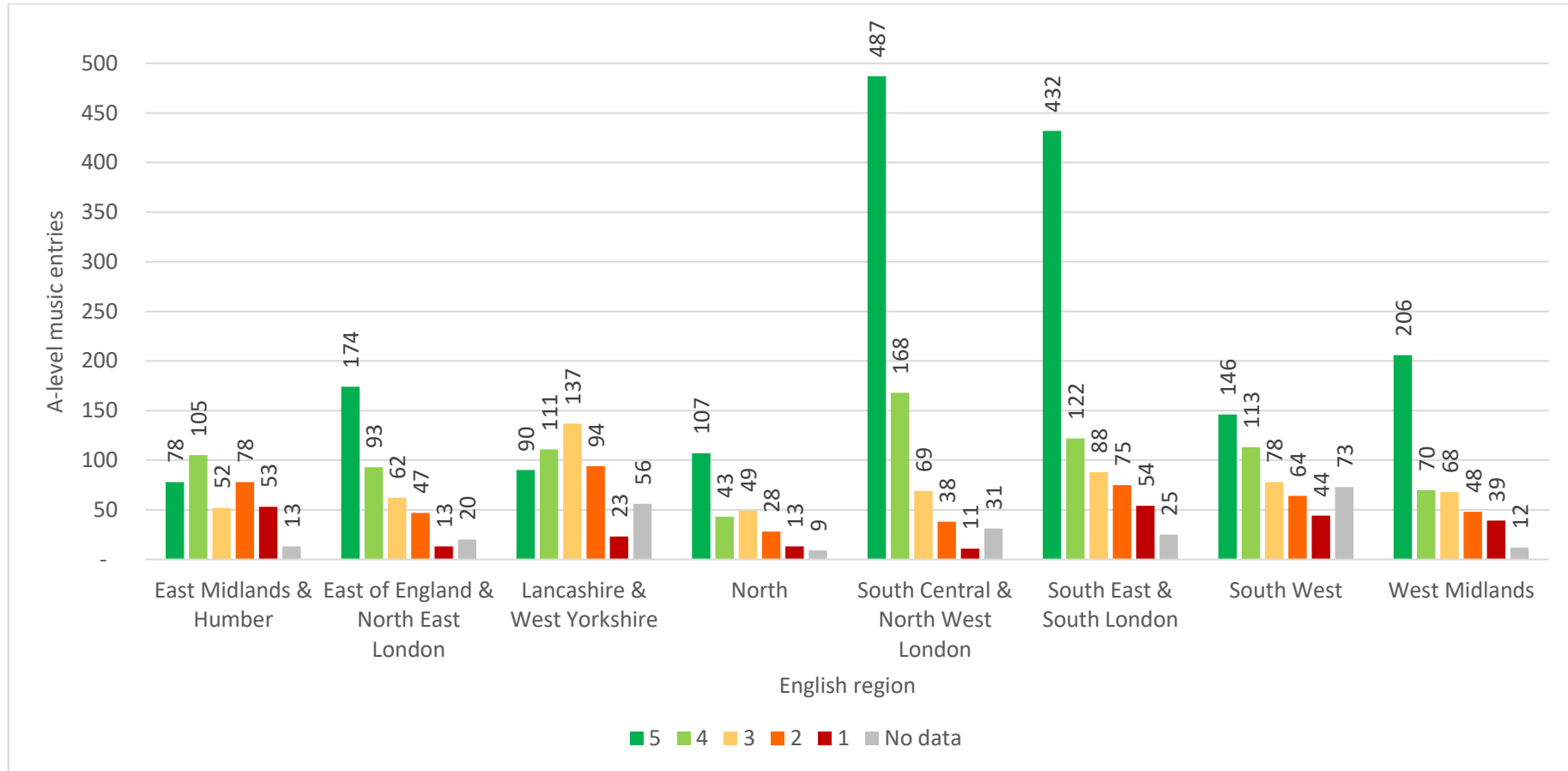
Table 21 - Regional distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2015/16.

Region - POLAR	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Regional total
East Midlands & Humber	78	105	52	78	53	13	379
East of England & North East London	174	93	62	47	13	20	409
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	90	111	137	94	23	56	511
North of England	107	43	49	28	13	9	249
South Central & North West London	487	168	69	38	11	31	804
South East & South London	432	122	88	75	54	25	796
South West of England	146	113	78	64	44	73	518
West Midlands	206	70	68	48	39	12	443
Total Entries	1,720	825	603	472	250	239	4,109

In dividing the POLAR ratings into these regions, a number of interesting issues emerge, especially relating to the range of POLAR ratings within a region. Taking the case of South Central & North West London and South East & South London for example, it is clear that there is a large difference between the number of entries in POLAR 4 and 5 postcodes compared with those in POLAR 2 and 1. This division of entries maps onto the trend observed for data in 2016/17 and 2017/18.

For South Central & North West London, 60.57% of A-level music entries came from schools registered in postcodes with a POLAR 5 rating. By contrast, only 1.3% of A-level music entries came from POLAR 1 postcodes, drawing attention to important issues in equality of access for students to A-level music, irrespective of socio-economic background or parental income. Indeed, the disparities between the most highly advantaged educational areas and those with the greatest educational disadvantage vary across the ONS regions discussed here. Crucially, however, these vast ranges are most apparent in parts of the South East and London, widely regarded as the most affluent parts of England.

Figure 10 - Total entries for each POLAR rating by region in 2015/16.



2014/15

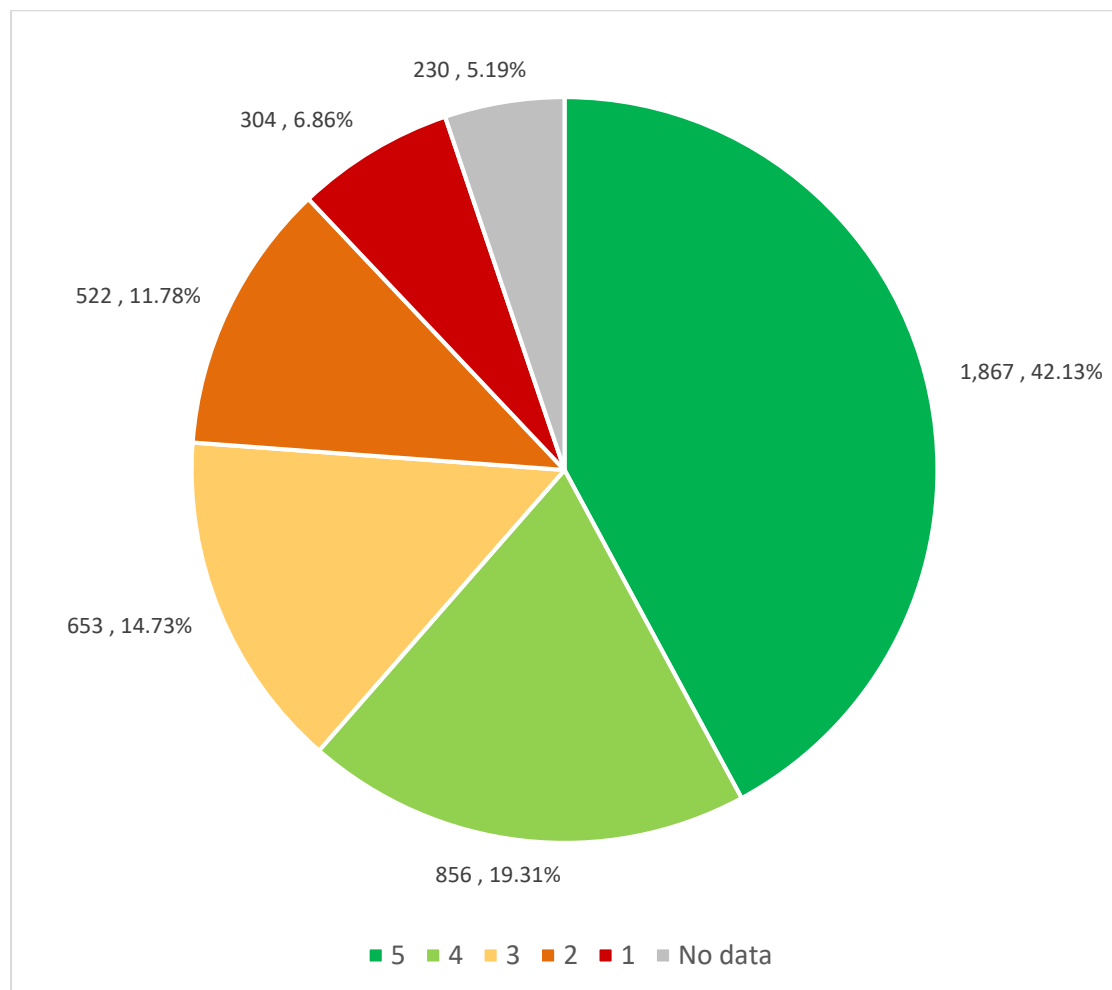
A similar distribution of A-level music entries across POLAR regions was also observed in 2014/15, with over 75% of entries coming from POLAR 3, 4, and 5 postcodes.

Table 22 - Distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2014/15.

POLAR rating	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Total
Total A-Level Music Entries	1,867	856	653	522	304	230	4,432

As observed earlier in this report, entry numbers were slightly higher in 2014/15 than in 2015/16. Even with these higher entry figures, it is significant that entries from POLAR 5 postcodes alone accounted for 42% of total A-level music entries in 2014/15. This compares with only 6.9% of entries being made from schools located in POLAR 1 postcodes. The distribution of entry figures is represented graphically in Figure 11.

Figure 11 - Distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2014/15.



Regional Picture

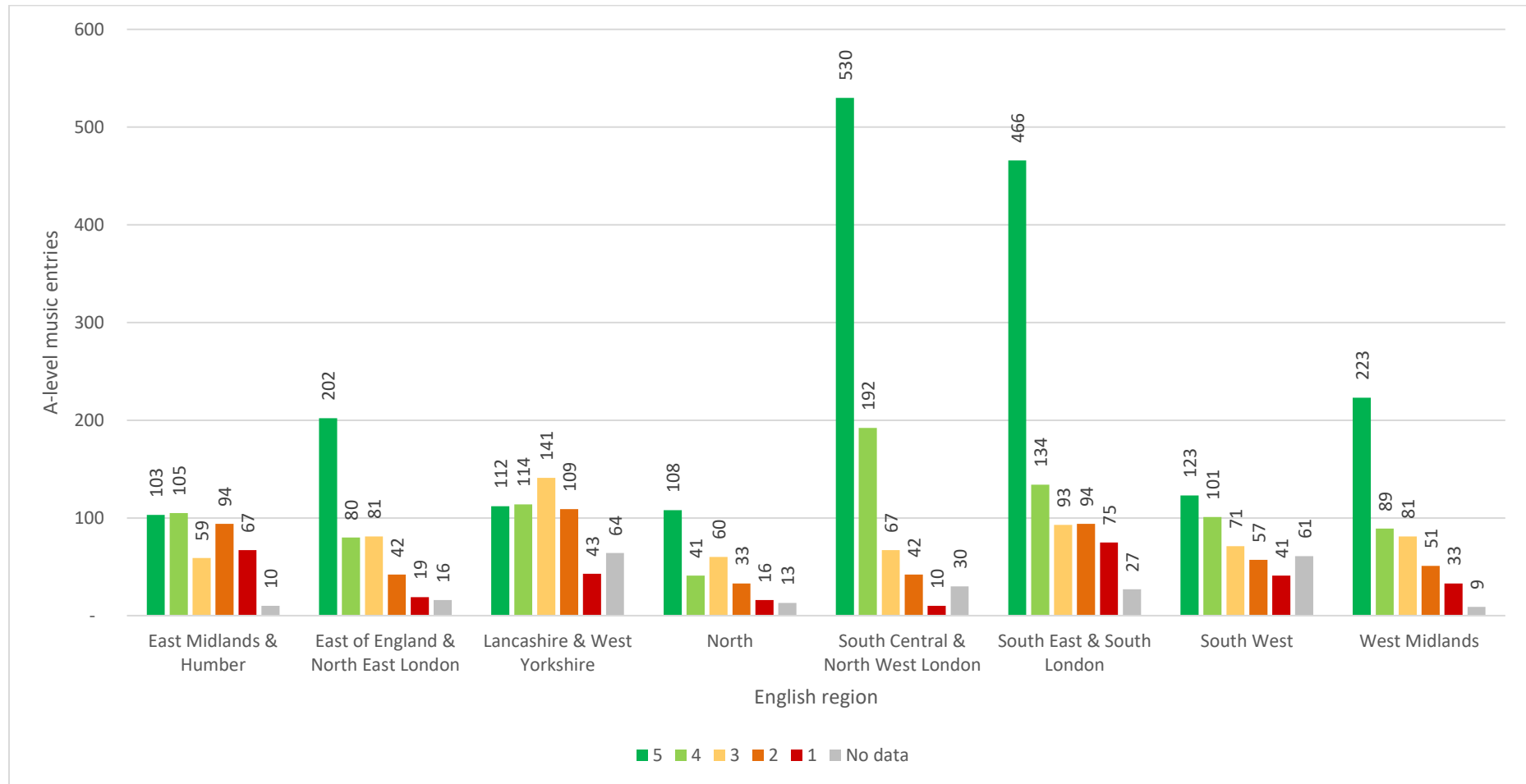
Nationally it is interesting to observe the prevalence of POLAR 5 postcodes in high numbers of A-level entries. A consideration of these data at regional level shows the different ways in which entries from POLAR postcodes are proportioned differently.

Table 23 - Regional distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2014/15.

Region – POLAR	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Regional total
East Midlands & Humber	103	105	59	94	67	10	438
East of England & North East London	202	80	81	42	19	16	440
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	112	114	141	109	43	64	583
North	108	41	60	33	16	13	271
South Central & North West London	530	192	67	42	10	30	871
South East & South London	466	134	93	94	75	27	889
South West	123	101	71	57	41	61	454
West Midlands	223	89	81	51	33	9	486
Total Entries	1,867	856	653	522	304	230	4,432

As demonstrated in Table 23, POLAR 5 postcodes are most prevalent in those regions which include parts of London, with South Central & North West London and South East & South London being particularly noteworthy in this regard. In South Central & North West London, 60.85% of entries came from POLAR 5 postcodes, compared with just 1.15% from POLAR 1 postcodes. Entries from POLAR 4 postcodes in Lancashire & Yorkshire and East Midlands & Yorkshire were slightly higher than those from POLAR 5 postcodes, though this still points to a significant number of entries coming from schools located in the highest rated POLAR postcodes. The distribution of entries within regions is represented in graphical format in Figure 12.

Figure 12 - Total entries for each POLAR rating by region in 2014/15.



2013/14

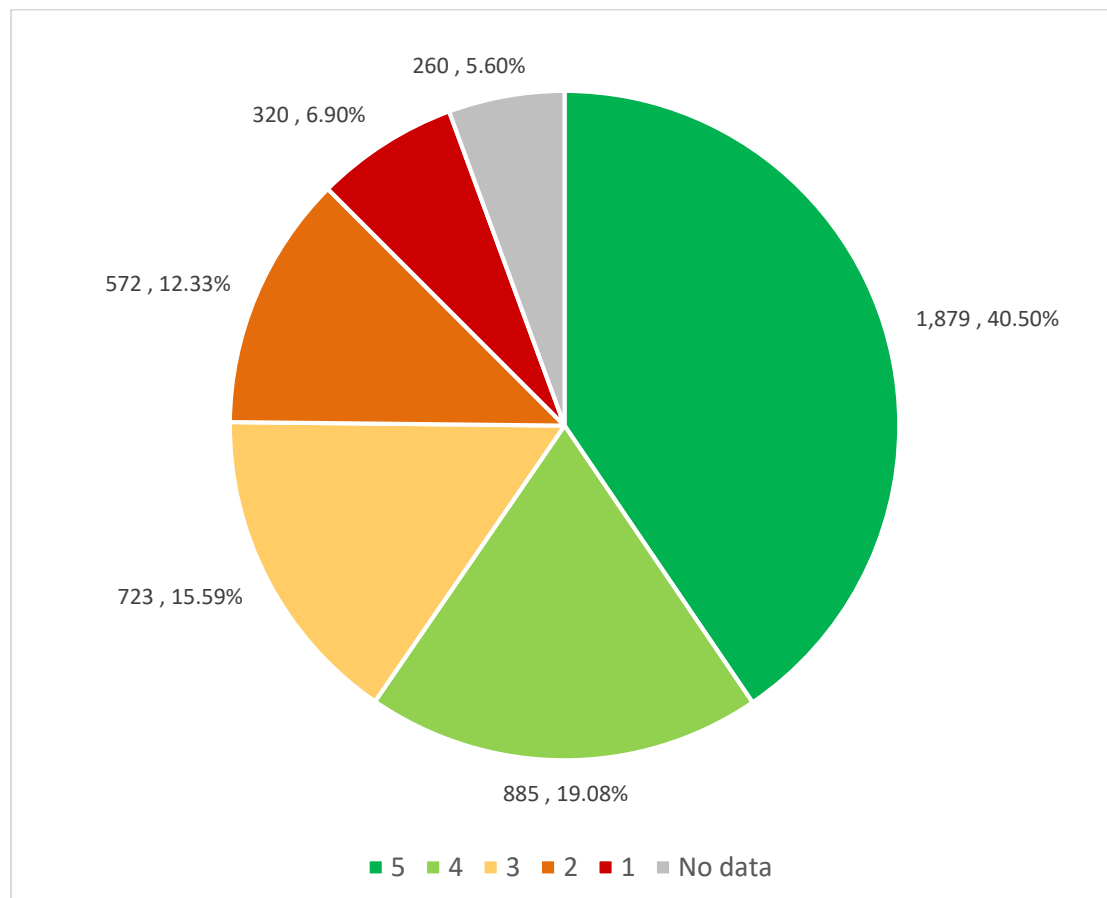
The final year of data under consideration in this analysis shows a remarkably similar pattern of entry distribution across POLAR postcodes. As shown in the table below, POLAR 5 postcodes are represented disproportionately in terms of the number of entries for A-level music.

Table 24 - Distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2013/14.

POLAR rating	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Total
Total A-Level Music Entries	1,879	885	723	572	320	260	4,639

It is also significant that the proportional representation of each postcode is largely similar to other years of data considered in this report. For example, 40.5% of entries came from POLAR 5 postcode schools, compared with only 6.9% of entries from POLAR 1 postcodes. The distribution of these entries is represented graphically in Figure 13.

Figure 13 - Distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2013/14.



Regional picture

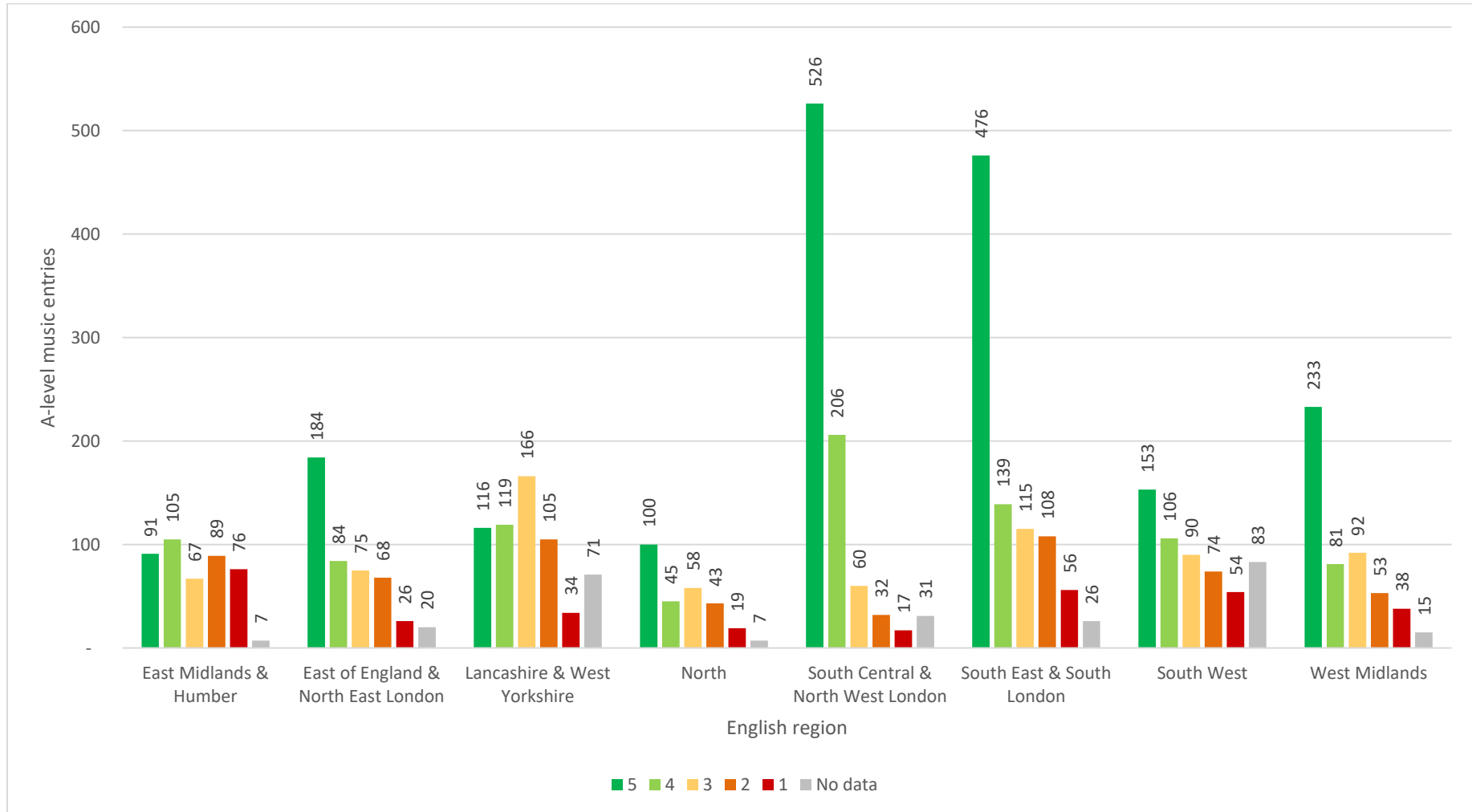
Exploring this data at a regional level provides further evidence to support the emerging trends identified earlier in this report, though with some important differences.

Table 25 - Regional distribution of A-level music entries by POLAR rating in 2013/14.

Region - POLAR	5	4	3	2	1	No data	Regional Total
East Midlands & Humber	91	105	67	89	76	7	435
East of England & North East London	184	84	75	68	26	20	457
Lancashire & West Yorkshire	116	119	166	105	34	71	611
North	100	45	58	43	19	7	272
South Central & North West London	526	206	60	32	17	31	872
South East & South London	476	139	115	108	56	26	920
South West	153	106	90	74	54	83	560
West Midlands	233	81	92	53	38	15	512
Total Entries	1,879	885	723	572	320	260	4,639

As noted above, it is significant that the number of entries from POLAR 4 and 5 postcodes is very high, sitting at 19.07% (POLAR 4) and 40.5% (POLAR 5). Again, the proportion of entries from POLAR 1 postcodes is 6.9%, significantly lower than an equal division across POLAR postcodes would suggest. One of the main areas of change from 2014/15 is in entries from POLAR 3 postcodes. In 2013/14, POLAR 3 entries accounted for 15.59% of entries, compared with 14.73% of entries in 2014/15, and 14.68% of entries in 2015/16. Although this is only a small change, it suggests that whilst figures remain stable in the most affluent areas, entry numbers in the middle POLAR rated postcodes are dropping slightly.

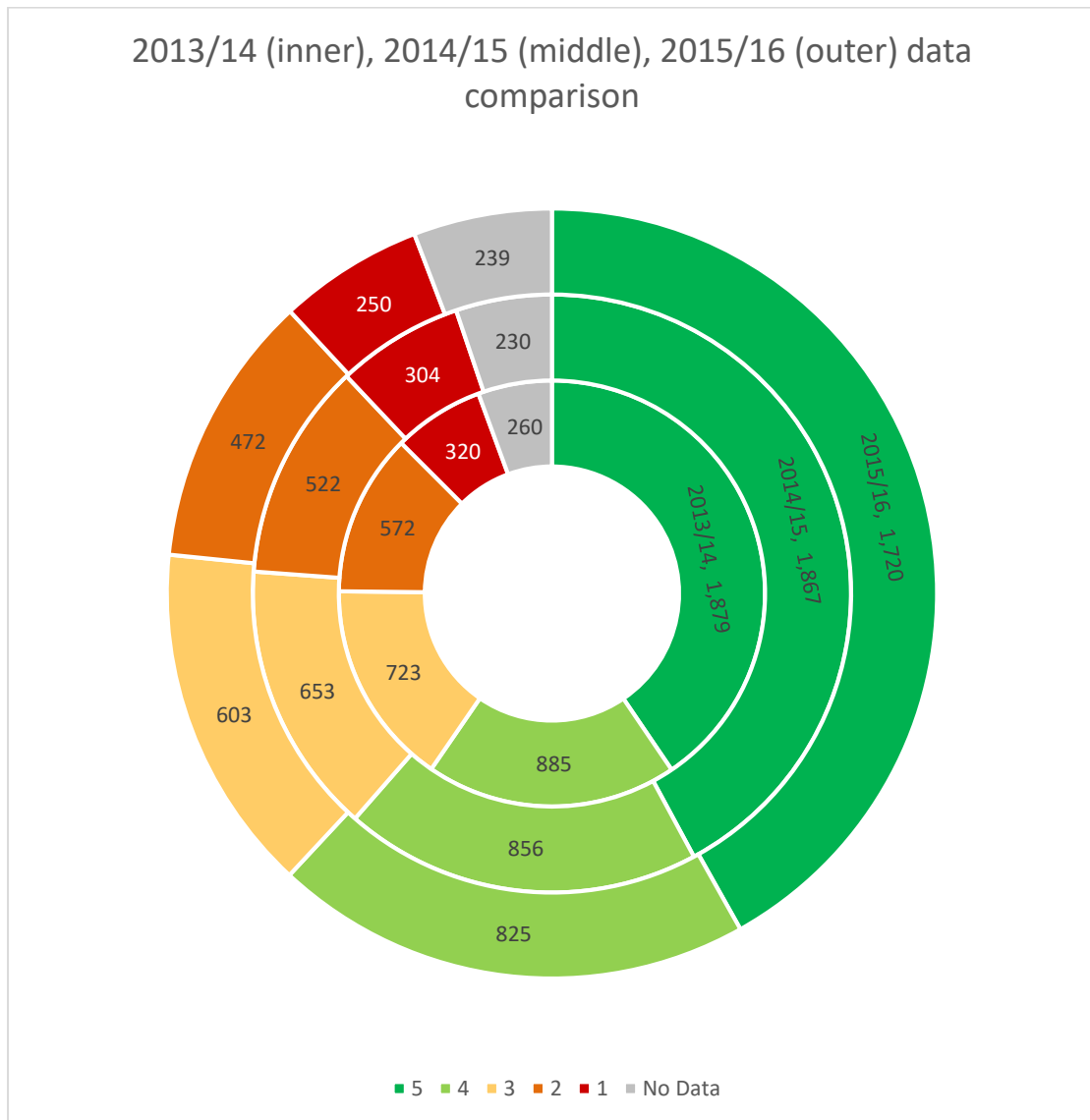
Figure 14 - Total entries for each POLAR rating by region in 2013/14.



Three-year comparison: 2013/14 – 2015/16

The analysis of data from 2013/14 to 2015/16 has revealed a number of interesting trends worthy of more detailed exploration. The main trend observed across these datasets is that A-level music entry is disproportionately represented from POLAR postcodes with the highest ratings. Across the three year period under consideration here, it appears that this trend has become more prevalent, meaning that proportionally entries have increased slightly from the most privileged areas of the country.

Figure 15 - Three-year comparison of A-level entries, distributed by POLAR rating



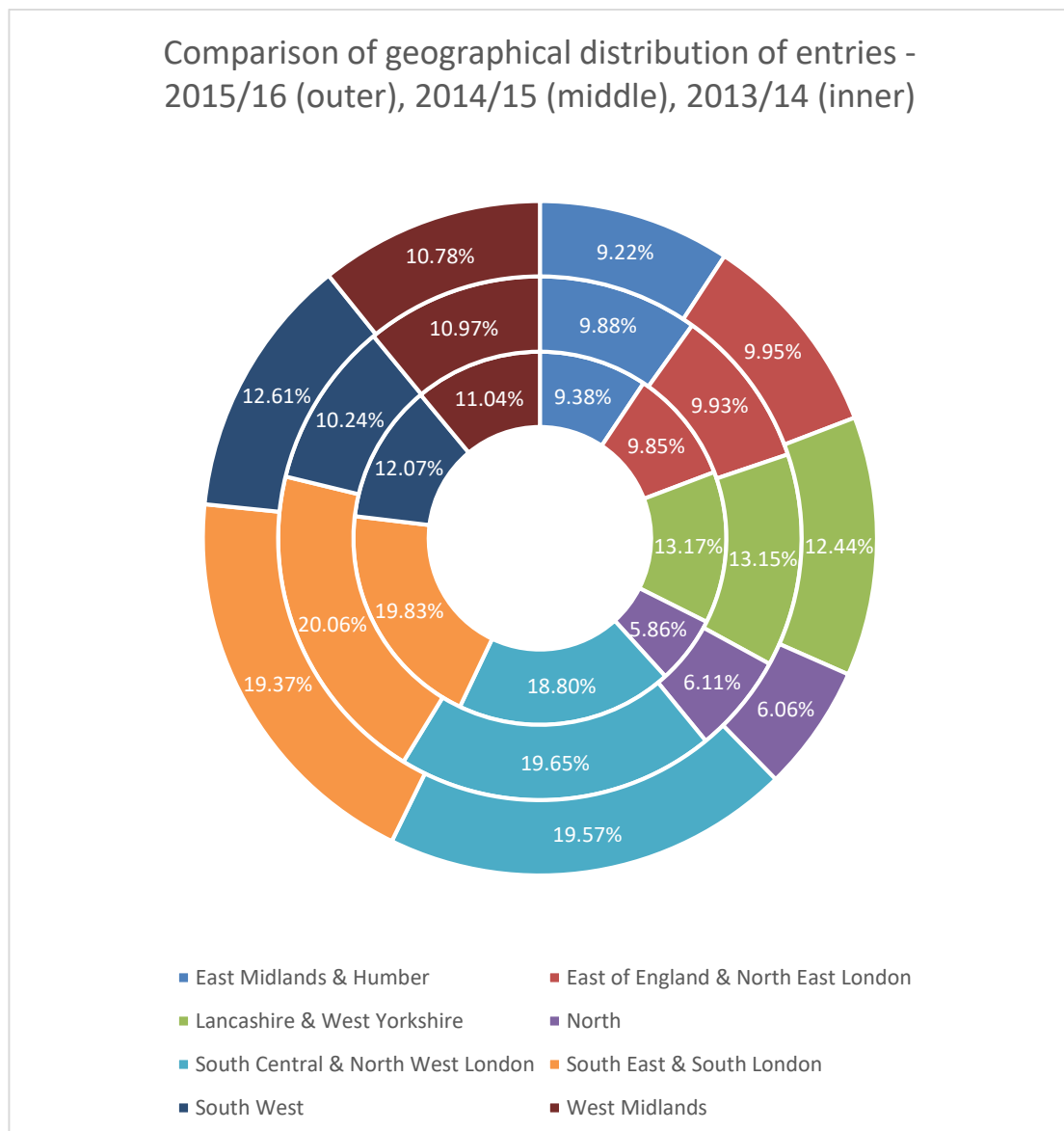
Although the changes across these years are small, they point to an incremental shift towards schools being located in the most affluent postcodes. With falling entry numbers, it is important to pinpoint the areas where these entries are falling from. Despite the fact that the biggest numerical decrease is seen in the entries from POLAR 5 postcodes, proportionally, decreases in entries from POLAR 1–3 postcodes far outweigh this. For example, the decrease in POLAR 3 entries from 723 in 2013/14 to 603 in 2015/16 constitutes a 16.6% decrease across the three years. Likewise, the change in POLAR 1 entries from 320

entries in 2013/14 to 250 in 2015/16 constitutes a 21.87% decrease over this time period. By way of contrast, the fall from 1,879 (2013/14) to 1,720 (2015/16) from POLAR 5 postcodes amounts to an 8.46% reduction across the same time period. It is important that such a trend is monitored, especially as entry numbers for A-levels in the creative arts are falling as a whole. If A-level music is only supported by, and offered in, those schools located in more affluent areas, then the social justice implications for equality of access to A-level music become even more concerning than they appear to be, based on the geographical mappings set out above.

Regional comparisons

In addition to considering the distribution of A-level entries across this time period it is important to consider the extent to which geographical distribution of A-level music entries has changed or remained stable.

Figure 16 - Three-year comparison of geographical distribution of A-level entries.

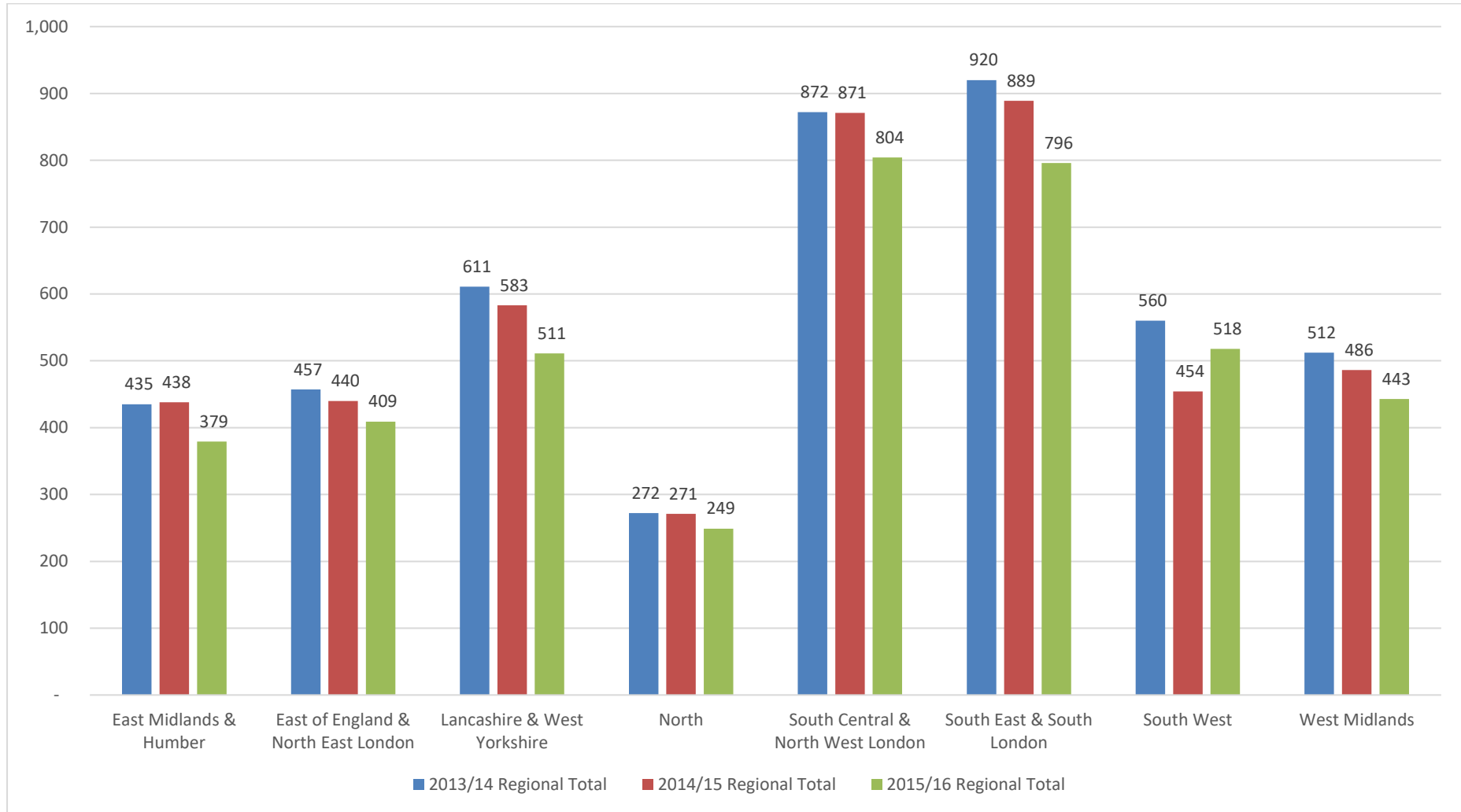


From Figure 16 it is clear that, in percentage terms, the division of A-level music entries has remained broadly stable across this three-year period. Comparing 2013/14 with 2015/16, all regions remained within a single percentage point of their 2013/14 distribution of A-level entries. In 2014/15 the South West saw its share of A-level entries drop from 12.07% to 10.24%, but this recovered to 12.61% by 2015/16. South Central & North West London saw its share rise from 18.80% in 2013/14 to 19.57% in 2015/16, with this rise taking place in the context of falling numbers nationally.

Whilst such relative stability is encouraging in many regards, it likely points towards quite entrenched traditions of A-level music in some examination centres, with those whose participation in A-level music is more difficult to justify falling victim to competitive timetabling pressures and associated costing measures in schools. The distribution of falling entry figures can be seen in Figure 17.

The picture painted by Figure 17 is one of entry numbers in decline. This is an inescapable fact; year on year, fewer students are being entered for A-level music. Across this three-year period shown in this chart, Lancashire & West Yorkshire saw a decrease of 100 entries, a significant figure when the numbers of entries are already relatively low to begin with. It is encouraging that figures from the South West recovered slightly between 2014/15 and 2015/16. However, it is somewhat concerning that after remaining relatively stable in 2014/2015, figures dropped in almost every region across 2015/16. This is a trend that needs to be monitored closely.

Figure 17 - Three-year comparison of A-level music by region.



Discussion and Conclusions

This report has drawn attention to a number of important issues relating to A-level music provision, equality of access to musical opportunities, falling entry figures, and the threats posed to advanced music making in schools around the country. In the following discussion we will deal with each of these points in more detail.

Decline in A-level uptake and offer

The low levels of A-level music entry nationally, and the noticeable decline across the previous five years, raises important questions about the access that all young people have to advanced musical learning within a school context. The data analysed in this report highlight an important potential issue in terms of pipelining for the sector as a whole, especially if the downward trend continues. With so many schools maintaining very small A-level music groups of fewer than five students, it is important to consider the point at which engagement will drop to such an extent that a critical mass of entries can no longer be sustained. Once this point is reached, it is likely that there will be something of an inward collapse of entries from many schools, with only the most privileged schools being able to maintain these levels. There is also the concern that once the provision has gone, maybe the teacher does too; this means music as a subject will be very difficult to reintroduce. As music is a long-term pursuit, and progression from novice to intermediate is measured in years normally, this will not be a 'quick-fix' to put right.

The gradual effects of this are already being realised in the slight increases in the proportion of entries coming from the independent schools sector. Whilst it can be accepted that the four specialist music schools might artificially inflate the number of entries for independent schools, it is significant that entries from this sector are considerably overrepresented as a proportion of all A-level entries. Although attainment is not necessarily higher in the independent sector, those who lack the means to support private instrumental study are unlikely to have sufficient income to pay for school fees, even if a bursary supports them to a greater or lesser extent. From the five years of data analysed here it is clear that larger centres of entry tend to be those described as 'independent schools' or from sixth-form colleges. With the current funding climate putting significant pressure on school budgets, it might assume that those institutions with larger numbers of A-level music entries may be more resilient to potential subject cuts, but even so cases of critical minimal mass will need to be met here too.

At the opposite end of the scale, the continued absence of A-level entries from some local authorities highlights a more worrying pattern, whereby young musicians who may wish to pursue their music education in a formal school-based qualification are not being able to. It is simply inconceivable that so many local authorities could have few or no advanced musicians who might wish to go on to study A-level music across such a number of years. Thus, there are important issues around the opportunities offered to young musicians in these areas by music education hubs, schools, and the wider musical community. This has important social justice implications to support young musicians to continue their musical

progression and, if they wish, to sustain this through to higher education. If A-level music is not offered by a broad range of schools across a locality, then those young musicians who are unable to access the schools where it is offered are effectively shut out of this qualification. This will have implications for the diversity of applicants to higher music education, and worries for the cultural industry as a whole as a result.

Regional variations in A-level uptake

A-level music is a minority subject, with this being especially pronounced in schools located in disadvantaged areas. Entries are, in many ways, becoming proportionally more concentrated in advantaged areas, and in the independent sector. Whilst the impact of the EBacc may be a factor in the curriculum offered by schools, there is clear evidence of an issue with the future supply of young musicians becoming potential music graduates of suitable advanced standing if the downward trend continues. This is particularly acute in terms of training musicians in disadvantaged areas of the country, especially from the state-funded sector.

The data presented earlier in this report shows the extent to which A-level music entry varies across the country. At a regional level, the differences between the number of entries are very stark indeed across the five years considered here. A comparison between the number of entries from the South East and North East is particularly revealing in this regard (see Figure 10 for example). Indeed, the clustering of entries around London, the South East, and Manchester, points to a positive picture of A-level music in these regions, but also draws attention to deep inequalities of access for young people across all regions. This undoubtedly is symptomatic of the complex nature of musical barriers in some regions, which might include restricted access to high-quality music making opportunities, lack of prestigious venues within the regions, rural or geographical remoteness, and generally lower levels of engagement in the arts from the populations of these regions. This likely forms part of a vicious cycle of low engagement for aspiring young musicians who are not necessarily able to capitalise on opportunities in the way that young people in more affluent areas might do so. The recent success of Hull as City of Culture has shown, in the short-term at least, how significant investment in broad community arts activities can foster a passion for the arts even in one of the most deprived areas of the country, but the longer term implications of this are not yet known. This is an issue that needs to be considered by the music education community as a whole, not just the conservatoires and higher music education sector.

It is also significant that there is a noticeable gap between the number of A-level music entries coming from schools located in POLAR 1 and POLAR 5 postcodes. This gap remains relatively consistent across the datasets considered in this report. This is particularly noticeable in data from South Central & North West London, where the number of entries from POLAR 5 postcodes is significantly higher than that from POLAR 1 postcodes. Whilst these POLAR ratings relate to where the school is located, and do not necessarily reflect the individual characteristics of their pupils, it is significant that schools located in postcodes

with historically high levels of access to higher education far outstripped the A-level music entries from those in the lowest POLAR quintile.

The large gap between entries from POLAR 1 and POLAR 5 postcodes is particularly noticeable in 6 of the 8 regional classifications used for this analysis (see Figure 10, Figure 12, and Figure 14). This is significant as it points towards a trend of postcodes with high levels of access to higher education being overly represented in the spread of A-level entries. Whilst the present analysis does not permit detailed investigation of the socio-economic standing of individual school populations, this is a finding which draws attention to the entrenched challenges which the sector faces to increase the diversity of those pursuing A-level music and, in turn, possibly then going on to higher music education.

Pipelining and diversifying the music college population

What is also an issue, and this is particularly relevant to conservatoire access, is that higher education institutions cannot admit a student who has not applied. Whilst self-evident, it is important to understand this in more detail. There are many reasons why a student might choose not to pursue their music education through A-level and then higher education, but this is unlikely to be the fault of the conservatoire or university. Discussing the possibilities of 'contextualised admissions' in higher education in a more general sense, Gorard et al. observed:

Contextualised admissions focus on those who apply...They will not solve the most serious problems of access for those not even in a position to apply. The problem is that students move through the phases of education becoming more socially stratified with every choice or transition, including the option to drop out of education entirely (Gorard et al., 2019, pp. 120–121)

In a musical context, we can track these issues back through to the earlier stages of learning a musical instrument, and the socio-economic barriers that some young musicians face. Recent research from the Musicians' Union presents a stark contrast between the uptakes of music lessons from high and low income families:

Families with lower income, earning under £28k a year, are half as likely to have a child learning a musical instrument as families on higher incomes, earning over £48k a year. (Musicians' Union, 2018, p.2)

Such figures present significant challenges for the conservatoire sector, and music education community. Support in the earlier phases of musical learning, especially around transitions from Whole Class Ensemble Teaching – also known as 'First Access' or 'Wider Opportunities' – is crucial to addressing these imbalances. However, as we have discussed, such changes will take time to feed into applications to conservatoires. To have a more immediate impact, work needs to be done at a local level to inform young people of the possible routes into higher education that may be open to them, especially for a subject like music in many HEIs which may well carry a whole host of cultural connotations linked with privilege and elitism. This is particularly important in local authorities with low levels of entry for A-level music. Similarly, if children and young people are not learning music in sufficient numbers at a

suitably advanced level, there need to be systems in place to support musical engagement from younger ages right through to advanced stages to get them to this level. Conservatoires can help, but to get to be advanced learner, a young person has to have been on a trajectory of achievement to reach this point, and this has to be supported by progression routes. Lack of A-level uptake may point towards earlier pipelining issues in certain localities, and the squeezing out of music from school curricula more generally. The solutions to these issues are complex and will take some time to remedy. A combination of raising the profile of higher music institutions with currently underrepresented populations, increased engagement from wider communities, improving understandings of the career routes open to musicians, and strategic working between organisations will support this, but only if activity is coordinated across the sector. The responsibility for this cannot lie with a single organisation, and effective partnerships need to be established to support this. Music education hubs can play a key role, but will not be able to pursue this from the MEH grant alone as it is currently operationalised.

Summary

The consultation and comparison of national datasets, namely HEFCE POLAR data and the National Pupil Database, has allowed a clear correlation between A-level music entry and the postcode localities with the greatest access to higher education provision to be identified. The disproportionately large number of A-level entries from the uppermost POLAR quintiles presents a significant challenge for those young people who may wish to take A-level music, but are unable to owing to adequate provision not being available in local schools. Indeed, the fact that there were local authorities in each year of the analysis here that went without A-level music entries (some on multiple occasions) is striking, especially as these localities are often centred in less affluent parts of the country. It is to be hoped that it is not the case that these local authority areas lack talented musicians. Diversification of the profession will be highly problematic if support is not offered in these geographical areas, but this needs to be coordinated, appropriate, and targeted, and will take time to come to fruition. The responsibility lies with the sector as a whole to address these deep inequalities, dispel myths around music not being a 'serious' or worthwhile profession, and to open up progression routes to achieve musical excellence.

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