



The full picture of music qualifications in England – 5 key facts:

- **More people than ever are studying music qualifications in schools and colleges** - The total number of school and college level music qualifications (including GCSE, A level and formal pop music qualifications from BTEC, RSL, UAL and NCFE) has INCREASED by 65.3% from 42886 (1994) to 70905 (2020) in the last 25 years;
- **This increase is due to Formal Pop Music Courses and Qualifications** -This is overwhelmingly due to the introduction and spread in popularity of formal pop music courses and qualifications where their combined total candidature has grown from 83 in 1994 to 31020 in 2020;
- **The decline in GCSE and A level music is not as large as it seems over 25 years** - Traditional music qualifications, GCSE and A level, have declined over the same 25 years, but by 7.2% only, from 42803 (1994) to 39885 (2020);
- **There is emerging evidence that formal pop music qualifications serve a wider and more inclusive social profile of pupils – more economically and socially disadvantaged.** Formal pop music qualifications serve a far wider and less economically and educationally advantaged cohort of students than music A Level according to UK Government POLAR and Multiple Deprivation data (see below).
- **Formal pop music qualifications and their associated courses have been running successfully for 25 years or more in the UK** – this is not an aspiration, it is **an achievement**

This means:

- **Formal pop music qualifications are now 43.7% (2020) of the total of music qualifications taken in England** compared with 0.2% (1994), as the table below shows, and this percentage is rising.
- If current trends continue, it is likely that **formal pop music qualifications may overtake GCSE and A Level music** in popularity within 10 years. In 2015 the total number of pop music qualifications taken was 28010 which has risen to 31020 in 2020. This increase of 3010 within five years suggests the difference between GCSE and A level candidature over pop music qualifications that stands in 2020 at 8865 may be closed or overtaken within a decade if pop and rock qualifications continue the same upward trend and if A level and GCSE candidature continues to decline in similar fashion.
- **Formal pop music qualifications offer the opportunity to grow music education** in schools and colleges for all pupils through inclusive and exciting curricula. Over the last 25 years this has been led by some of the institutions within UK Music’s MAP¹ and others such as RSL Awards.

1. See <https://www.ukmusic.org/education-skills/music-academic-partnership-map/>

25 Year Trend Changes in School & College (incl training providers) Music Qualifications in England 1994-2020 (by academic year)²

QUALIFICATION	2020 PUPIL CERTIFICATIONS	2019 PUPIL CERTIFICATIONS	1999 PUPIL CERTIFICATIONS	1994 PUPIL CERTIFICATIONS
GCSE (music)	34645	34425	43002	37003
A Level (music, incl. music technology)	5240	5495	6875	5800
Pearson (BTEC)	17240	17000	2795	83
RSL	8020	8935	2000*	n/a
UAL	4290	3455	n/a	n/a
NCFE	1435	1475	n/a	n/a
Total No. of General Music Qualifications	39885	39915	49877	42803
Total No. of Vocational Music Qualification	31020	30825	4795	83
% of Gen. Music Quals of all school music qualifications	56.3	56.4	91	99.8
% of Voc. Music Quals of all school music qualifications	43.7	43.6	9	0.2
Total No. of Gen. & Voc. Music Quals.	70905	70740	54672	42886

Notes:

- General Music Qualifications include music GCSE and A Levels in England – source Ofqual³
- Formal Pop Music Qualifications include BTECs and equivalent music qualifications offered by the other examination boards listed – source Ofqual (2021) below. These numbers are based on RSL Awards' analysis of the current scope and range of formal pop music qualifications currently recorded as being taken by pupils in England on courses with high levels of music specific content.
- * Precursor to RSL Vocational Qualifications created by Access to Music listed under RSL in 1999 here
- 1994 chosen as first year of any significant amount BTEC popular music qualifications, 1999 shows initial growth for these plus the early Access to Music qualifications, while the figures for 2020 confirm the 2019 position 25 & 26 years later showing the current status of candidate number across the qualifications and illustrating the long term trend is well established.

2. See List of qualifications included in these totals at the end of this paper

3. Ofqual (2021) Dataset 2012 to present – England Ofqual accessed on 19/07/2021 on <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/vocational-qualifications-dataset> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/annual-qualifications-market-report-academic-year-2019-to-2020>

What does this full picture of Music Qualifications suggest?

- **Music education's decline being linked to GCSE and A Level candidature is only half the story.** The full picture is that school and college music education has changed. Innovation has happened, providing learning and teaching that responds to the musical interests and passions of pupils and students directly, encouraging enterprise and social awareness, and respecting and fostering creativity as a result of a diverse pool of staff and students or pupils. The qualification data indicates schools and colleges have grown provision for their pupils to study formally pop music alternatives to GCSE and A level music. This innovative alternative practice in music education has been led by a raft of key organisations, mainly specialists founded between 1982-2000, who have pioneered this re-imagining of music education fit for the modern world – from RSL Awards, ICMP, ACC and BIMM to ACM and the BRIT School.
- **Despite this innovation, the rhetoric about music education being in decline has worryingly become firmly ingrained in our current national understanding of the state of the subject as a whole.** For example, in 2019 the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education co-published its “State of the Nation” report alongside the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the University of Sussex as an attempt to provide the basis for the government to act in the face of “the crisis facing music education.”⁴ The report cites the decline in GCSE and A level music candidature as a key part of its evidence for this predicament within a section of the report titled “music education: what crisis?”. Of real concern is that the report is silent on the number of students taking formal pop music qualifications. There is no information of any kind about formal pop music qualifications in the report’s discussion of music education for 16 and 18 year olds, despite this partially being included in the Daubney and Mackrill research which the report draws on⁵. This incomplete set of data has recently been used again to inform Ofsted’s 2021 *Research Review Series: music*⁶. Here the belief that music is declining at GCSE and A level is widened to include the pop and rock music sphere by using BTEC music candidate statistics. This seems to be an attempt to argue that the problems with music education are not addressed, at least in large part, by an adoption of the more flexible approach to repertoire, inspiration from professional practice and incorporation of pupil autonomy that formal pop music qualifications, not just BTEC but also RSL Awards and others, embody. Ofsted’s review cites the original 2017 Daubney & Mackrill research and states that ‘the decline in the number of pupils taking music at key stage 4 applies to both BTEC and GCSE.’⁷ A close review of Ofqual’s data reveals quite a different picture. This challenges both the data used by Ofsted and the conclusions they draw based on this information in their report. This broadening is due to the RSL Awards, NCFE and UAL music qualifications which have been embraced by a host of schools and colleges, including the BRIT School. Daubney & Mackrill’s research is correct in quantifying that BTEC’s numbers have declined since 2015. However, their conclusion that this is a decline in popularity for formal pop music qualifications is open to question. Ofqual’s candidature figures suggest a more likely interpretation of this BTEC decline is a change in school and college’s preference towards RSL Awards and UAL away from BTEC. Ofqual’s data shows that from 2015 to 2020 BTEC music qualifications declined from 24535 to 17240 candidates. Over the same period, RSL Awards and UAL increased from 3475 to 8015 candidates (RSL Awards) and zero to 4290 candidates (UAL). In addition, NCFE entered this field and in 2020 their qualifications attracted 1475 candidates. Altogether, the true picture of pop music qualifications’ candidature is the cumulative total of the BTEC, RSL Awards, UAL and NCFE candidature. In 2020 this is 31020, while in 2015 it was 28010⁸. While this is only a 10.7% increase over the past 5 years, it is certainly not a decline. Most significantly, it signals a long term change of direction for the range of music qualifications being chosen in schools and colleges.

⁴ Daubney, A, Spruce, G & Annetts, D (2019) Music Education: state of the nation – report by the all-party Parliamentary group for music education, the ISM and the University of Sussex, ISM p.2

⁵ Daubney, A & Mackrill, D (2017) Changes in Secondary Music Curriculum Provision 2012-2016 University of Sussex – as accessed on 16/07/2021 in summary form at https://www.ism.org/images/files/Changes-in-Secondary-Music-Curriculum-Provision-2012-16_Summary-final.pdf - list BTEC candidate numbers as well as GCSE and A Levels but the ‘State of the Nation’ report does not include any information on BTEC’s or other vocational music qualifications. See https://www.ism.org/images/files/Changes-in-Secondary-Music-Curriculum-Provision-2012-16_Summary-final.pdf on 16/07/2021 - the first bullet point in the section titled ‘Impact of the EBacc’ as accessed on 16/07/2021

⁶ Ofsted (2021) *Research Review Series: music* as accessed on 16/07/2021 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-music/research-review-series-music>

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⁸ All data sourced by the RSL Awards team based on Ofqual figures derived from an analysis of information in Ofqual (2021) in Bibliography

- **25 years ago, these formal pop music qualifications were almost non-existent, so the long term trend is of significant increase.** It is important that Ofsted and other government bodies recognise that BTEC are not the only formal pop music qualifications being taken in schools and colleges, and that these types of music qualifications as a whole are generally at least maintaining their popularity and over the medium (5 years) and over the long term (25 years) they have increased considerably, unlike GCSE and A level music candidature. Relevant awarding bodies and specialist colleges like the BRIT School, BIMM and LIPA, RSL Awards and UAL could play a vital role in informing policy and further improve the standing of creative arts within education.
- **Formal pop music qualifications work and they serve a different – more inclusive – pupil profile to conventional GCSE and A Level music.** This can be seen if you watch these case study videos, first at New College Swindon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXwV5AkD3A0> Also, at the amazing Supajam: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rrrl5NISWBI>
- **Formal pop music education courses and qualifications help develop individuals who succeed in the music industry.** The websites of the BRIT School, ICMP, ACC, ACM, RSL Awards and others are full of music industry success stories who have taken pop music education courses. They include Adele and Ed Sheeran, Stormzy and Dave’s producer Fraser T Smith, and leading music industry business people. A few are RSL Awards Fellows as a small example of the industry contribution of these courses and qualifications: <https://www.rslawards.com/rsl-fellowship/>
- **Traditional music qualifications may well have stopped growing because music A level and GCSE have not broadened their appeal and rely on a narrow band of mainly middle class pupils.** Academic research appears to support this. For example, in their study for the Royal College and Royal Academy of Music, “Geographical and social demographic trends of A level Music Students” in 2019, Whittaker, Fautley & Kinsella use the government’s POLAR classification to analyse geographically the level of disadvantage pupils may have based on their post code’s POLAR classification of their likelihood to access higher education. They observed:

“...at least 60% of A level music entries each came from schools in postcodes with POLAR ratings of 4 or 5....Areas of lower levels of A level music entry tend to correlate with lower POLAR ratings and greater levels of deprivation.”⁹

Their observations were stable across the 5-year period of their study and confirm that traditional music education as embodied in A-Level music is becoming the preserve of pupils from middle and higher income families. Despite this, Whittaker, with Lamont and Maton, do not include the impact of formal pop music qualifications in much of their work. Whittaker’s 2021 article “Teacher Perceptions of A-Level Music: tensions, dilemmas and decline” is typical of this. He compares unfavourably what he sees as the narrow genre-defined assessments of graded music examinations and formal pop music qualifications such as BTEC’s with the supposed wide stylistic range of A level music which he believes “in theory at least, addresses a broader range of musical skills within a single qualification.”¹⁰ He repeats the traditionalists’ belief that the EBACC has discouraged schools from teaching music, but crucially fails to research how formal pop music qualifications impact on this issue. This may be down to the methodological challenge of sourcing data, but this difficulty should not be a reason for this omission. He states:

“All this points towards the place of A-Level music as a relatively exclusive qualification in the British educational landscape.....Given the different operationalisation of BTEC’s and equivalent musical Level 3 qualifications...the present study does not investigate these.”¹¹

- **By contrast, RSL Awards’ internal analysis of our 8000 students currently registered in the UK from 2020-21 suggests students taking formal pop music qualifications seem more likely to represent the full range of the UK population compared with A level music candidates**

⁹ Whittaker, A, Fautley, M, Kinsella, V & Anderson, A (2019) Geographical and social demographic trends of A level Music Students Royal College of Music & Royal Academy of Music p.6

¹⁰ Whittaker, A (2021) Teacher perceptions of A level music: tensions, dilemmas and decline in British Journal of Music Education 1-15 p.1

¹¹ Ibid p.3

RSL Formal Qualifications in Pop Music 2019-2020 POLAR Quintiles by Percentage of Candidates ¹⁴ (Table 5)

POLAR QUINTILE	%
1	25
2	23
3	22
4	18
5	12

Research undertaken by the RSL Awards academic staff in May to June 2021 into our formal pop music students suggests these are taken by a significant and increasing number of black and ethnically diverse student cohort.

For this research project, the RSL Awards team received responses from 61 of our registered schools and colleges teaching in the 2020-21 academic year using our music qualifications. This covered 1816 of our students for this academic year, so a small but sizeable sample representing over 20% of our total music students this academic year. Of them, 27% of the students are reported as being of Black and ethnically diverse background. In addition, 23% of these 61 schools and colleges reported their Black and ethnically diverse student cohorts are growing, with only 3% reporting a decline and 74% citing no change. This demonstrates there is the potential to build a larger take up for these qualifications amongst Black and ethnically diverse students, as well as proving the reach of these qualifications into the British black and ethnically diverse community, quite unlike GCSE and A level music have traditionally achieved.

Recommendations:

- **Policies on music education should include detailed analysis of formal pop music qualifications to present the full profile of music education in the country;**
- **The expertise of the pioneers of formal popular music education courses and qualifications should be used to shape future policies on music education in order to increase its success, particularly in reaching the school age populations who have traditionally not engaged with music qualifications;**
- **School level music qualifications at Level 2 and 3 that currently succeed in attracting increasing numbers of students should be used as an example for the future of music education which can reach a broad constituency of the UK pupil population unlike previous attempts to do so through changes to GCSE and A level music;**
- **Research funding is provided directly to higher, further and other education organisations succeeding in the delivery of formal pop music qualifications to document their pedagogic best practice and use this as the basis for re-developing music teacher training;**
- **UK Music employers and popular music higher education courses should engage more fully with providers of formal pop music qualifications to ensure their future development continues to produce relevant and high quality outcomes attuned closely to their needs.**

The history, background and context to all of this will be set out in detail later this Autumn in a book published to coincide with RSL Awards' 30th Anniversary by Norton York 'Pop Music Education in the UK – 1960-2020'. To register interest in receiving news about the publication of this title, please email RSL at: NathalieGouverneur@rslawards.com

¹⁴ Details of what POLAR 4 Data means and how it is calculated can be found here as accessed on 09/06/2021: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/>. Our RSL Data survey data in this table came from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/search-by-postcode/> as accessed 18/05/2021 - 21/05/2021