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Chasing the Dream: Emerging Musicians' Migration to London During the Cost-of-Living Crisis

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ABSTRACT

While research abounds on musicians' precarity, emerging student musicians remain understudied, especially amidst migration for opportunity. This timely study addresses critical gaps by qualitatively exploring the experiences of popular music students who migrate to London for education and prospective careers. Set during the UK's recent cost-of-living crisis (2021-2022), rich interview data provides empirical insights into an important yet often overlooked group during a pivotal life transition. Findings reveal intensified financial and work-life struggles; however, remarkable resilience also emerges alongside identity shifts and peer bonds. Most significantly, despite hardships, London's enduring promise leads most to stay for perceived, unparalleled creative opportunities. Practical recommendations provide an important starting point for strengthening creative training and better-nurturing talents during an unsettled era.

Keywords: Talent migration, cost-of-living crisis, higher popular music education, international student musicians, music career precarity, Creative resilience, London music scene

Musicians-in-training face significant career precarity, often working full-time jobs while managing financial instability and work-life balance challenges (Teague & Smith, 2015). Students pursue popular music degrees to build human and social capital, but those who migrate for study face additional hurdles, including lack of support networks and cultural adaptation. International students particularly navigate unprecedented challenges amid global tensions and post-pandemic uncertainties (Yang & Tian, 2023). Despite the current cost-of-living crisis, students continue pursuing higher popular music education (HPME) and music careers.

This qualitative study examines popular music students' experiences in London during the 2022 cost-of-living crisis, focusing on creative work challenges, entrepreneurship (Tomie, 2020), and support networks (Zwaan et al., 2009). It frames talent migration as a key phase in artists' development as they seek opportunities and creative communities.

Given these understandings of creative work, I make four empirical points in this research to inform higher popular music education (HPME). 1) Students experience hardship affecting studies and career development, 2) students build resilience, resourcefulness, and transferable skills, 3) students rely on peer networks for support and opportunities, and 4) students experience migration to London as a transition to adulthood.

The article continues as follows: First, there is a literature review considering the resonances between literature on career precarity, migration and creative work. There follows a discussion of methods, before an empirical section that examines participants' experience of migration, study, and career development during the cost-of-living crisis in the UK. Finally, discussion and conclusion sections summarise the argument and describe its implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review examines musicians' working lives, migration as a career strategy, and London's appeal as a music capital, concluding with the 2022 cost-of-living crisis's impact on students.

Career precarity and migration

This study focuses on 19-30-year-olds who migrated to London to study popular music and build a career. While it is widely understood that musicians experience significant challenges in relation to career sustainability, musicians-in-training and emerging musicians are the most vulnerable of this group, due to lack of networks (Tolmie, 2017), and in the case of the migrant students in this study, a lack of familial and peer networks. Networks are important features for an emerging musician in developing a positive mindset towards a protean career, that is, a self-managed career where multiple roles are undertaken (Bennett, 2016). Zwaan et al.'s (2009) study of 340 Dutch musicians found performance experience and strong social support from family, partners and peers were key career success indicators. Engagement and a professional attitude towards networking and having a professional network were considered an approximation of the musician's reputation. In other words, who you know matters. These findings inform this inquiry into migrant musicians developing careers with little support.

The entrepreneurial nature of musicians' working life is well documented. Studies frequently show musicians relying on multiple jobs, with high levels of financial insecurity and emotional hardship (Bennett, 2016, 2013; Gaunt and Papageorgi, 2010; Hallam and Gaunt, 2012; Zwaan et al., 2009; and Partti, 2012).

Teague and Smith (2015) add work-life balance among these challenges. In their interview research with popular musicians, health was a key theme, particularly because musicians tend to take on more work than possible, needing to re-prioritise health. Implications for higher popular music education include promoting comprehensive understandings of musicians' work patterns and realistic career expectations. This raises questions around how institutions might better facilitate the complex balancing acts of work, study, and creative development amid the cost-of-living crisis.

While research on artists and creative workers abounds, few studies examine artists' career mobility. This relates to artists' complex work patterns and multiple employments, which national data collections cannot capture. Bennett (2010) calls for research on artists' practice, migration and working lives, rather than the arts' societal and economic roles. With limited opportunities, overseas migration remains a logical career development feature.

Artists travel seeking inspiration and opportunities. Musicians' migration stories reveal experiences beyond problematic discourses. While some migrate due to socio-economic problems, their mobility shows agency and self-determination. This builds 'transcultural capital' (Kiwana & Meinhof, 2011), enabling musical careers across locations and creating 'home' in diaspora. Talent migration raises 'brain drain' concerns, where countries face talent shortages affecting economic development and competitiveness (Latukha et al., 2022). However, acquired 'transcultural capital' established in the new location, can form an important part of human capital relevant to their home location (Shin & Choi, 2015) referred to as 'brain bridging' or 'brain circulation' (Mok & Han, 2016, p. 370). I seek to understand how participants create transnational resources, considering impacts for origin countries/communities.

International student growth is rapid, with graduating cohorts staying abroad for prospects, experiences, and networks (Mok & Han, 2016). Musicians facing diminishing opportunities at home, will often engage with international markets for greater career security (Bartleet et al. 2019; Bennett 2009, 2010). Bennett's (2010) study on the migration of Australian musicians from Western Australia, shows moves are either premeditated (decided on prior to the commencement of professional practice) or reluctant due to a lack of opportunities. The cultural image of a place and artistic connectivity also drive migration. Bennett's participants found smaller centers demand more entrepreneurial approaches to create opportunities, though early-career artists often lack these skills. London migration carries financial risk, leading this study to examine how participants develop entrepreneurial behaviors.

International students' motivations for studying abroad combine economic factors with cultural exploration, career aspirations, and personal development (Tokas et al., 2023). Despite uncertainties, international student mobility persists as a container of social promise and hope and as a locus of individual fantasy and desire' (Yang & Tian, 2023, p. ii). For young musicians, London promises study and career opportunities.

London: A land of opportunity

London is a centre for education, culture, and nightlife, ranking among top global student destinations (Study International, 2021). The National Accommodation Survey 2022 named London the best city for international students in 2023 (Purnell, 2022). While reports document international student growth, academic research rarely examines why students choose London or their experiences there. King, Lulle, Parutis & Saar (2018) studied early-career Baltic graduates in London. Participants valued London's cultural attractions and openness to alternative lifestyles, contrasting with their home countries' perceived provincialism. As a 'euro-city par excellence', London's streets echo with European languages (Favell, 2008). Some participants viewed London as a 'rite of passage' to adulthood, while others used it as a stepping stone, citing unaffordability.

London attracts musicians through its international music industry, record labels, and radio networks (Mazierska, 2018). Its grassroots and established venues create networking opportunities for emerging artists (Umney & Kretsos, 2015). However, London ranks as the world's most expensive city for new musicians (Baker, 2019), with rising rents threatening small businesses and venues (Mayor of London, 2017). By 2017, 25% of grassroots venues faced closure.

The cost-of-living crisis 2022

UK inflation rose sharply from early 2021 due to supply chain disruptions. Energy prices surged, with domestic gas and electricity increasing over 50% between June 2021-2022. The Russia-Ukraine conflict drove up UK food and materials costs (Harari et al., 2023).

Full-time students faced severe impacts. Weekly living costs ranged from £260-327, leaving some with under £12 for essentials (Zeldin-O'Neill, 2022). Limited rental availability forced some into homelessness – for example, 12% of Scottish students were affected (Weale, 2022) and one in ten students used food banks and were unable to afford textbooks and food (Brown, 2022).

The crisis affects the music industry differently than other businesses (Sutherland, 2022). While most businesses raise prices, live music depends on disposable income. Ticket sales fell 40% in 2022, with cancelled tours limiting opportunities for music graduates.

While research has explored precarity and entrepreneurship among professional musicians, the specific experiences of emerging student musicians during training remains understudied, especially those who strategically migrate for education and opportunities. Even less is known about the perspectives and lived realities of young creatives who choose London specifically. Though London's appeal as a creative hub is documented, few studies excavate the contemporary challenges migrant students face there or reveal how they negotiate increasing costs, instability, and work-life struggles unique to this global city. Their access to supportive networks and how they leverage mobility to advance

their careers also warrants examination. This study therefore addresses critical gaps by providing timely, empirical insights into an under researched group during the transition to adulthood period. Findings detail the motivations, resiliency, identity, and mobility of popular music students in London during the recent cost-of-living crisis. Their narratives hold significance for music education and mobility research while demonstrating how creativity perseveres despite adversity.

METHOD

This research draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in November 2022, with 30 students who migrated to London. Participants studied performance, production, composition, or management in popular music. Most participants were 21-25 years old, with five aged 26-30. Eight came from Eastern Europe, 12 from Western Europe, 1 from India, 1 from the USA, and 6 from English and Irish cities. Direct invitations and snowball sampling recruited volunteers. The study examines individual experiences regardless of nationality. Institutional ethics procedures were followed, with participants providing written consent, and pseudonyms protect participant and institution anonymity throughout this article. The interviews were conducted in-person, and audio-recorded and transcribed using the transcription application, OTTER.

Interviews (45-60 minutes) explored migration motivations, living arrangements, work, study, creative lives, and cost-of-living impacts. Students discussed migration's role in their life course and future plans. After several readings of the transcripts and manual coding of the data, thematic analysis revealed four themes for discussion: migration motivations, tensions between idealized opportunities and career precarity, managing hardship, and peer networks' role in opportunities and support.

POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

Following Creswell (2013), I acknowledge how my experiences intersect with this research on international music students in London. As a recent arrival from Australia, I experienced the challenges my participants faced. Navigating London's housing market and living costs gave me direct insight into their financial pressures and social dislocation. This shared experience informed my understanding while demanding careful reflection to avoid projecting my experiences onto their accounts.

My relationship with participants balanced multiple roles. Though they knew me through the university, none were current students, removing pressure to participate. My background as a professional musician provided what Berger (2015) calls access to the field, helping participants trust my understanding of music industry complexities. As Charmaz (2014) notes, social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed. My position as industry insider and London newcomer shaped the research interactions, offering the advantages of building rapport while requiring vigilance to preserve participants' unique perspectives.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

London's Enduring Appeal as a Music Capital Despite Emerging Awareness of Precarity

Participants revealed that a major driver behind their decisions to migrate to London was an idealised perception of the city as a vibrant global music capital brimming with creative opportunities. Veronica encapsulated this perception, "London is where it's at for music, networking, and opportunities". Sally noted, "London is one of the most famous cities for music...the music industry here is huge and there are many opportunities for singers and musicians." Many participants viewed their home cities as having limited opportunities. Rob explained that he could get more work in London, and that being labelled a 'London musician' would attract higher fees:

You can't just work in Liverpool or just in Manchester because there's not enough to do. I had a few friends who lived in London, and they were saying, even though it was more expensive, the fees that they would get were a lot more, and because they lived in London, they could charge more, and people would think, oh, they're from London, they're better. There's a real stigma with it, and now that I've started working in London, I've found the same thing.

Students, particularly from Eastern Europe, acknowledged that their home countries' music industry and educational offerings were not robust or conducive to their goals. Jason explained, "the music industry in Lithuania is really, really small, there's not much opportunity there". Like many other European students, he also said "there were no music production courses and no, like music business-related courses back home, so that was kind of the main reason why I wanted to move to London".

Gemma, a student from Romania had similar concerns, "I couldn't find popular singing, I found jazz and classical music, but what I want to do is not the same, so I had to find another city", and Elaine from Latvia said, "there is no such degree". While the UK pioneered popular music degrees with over 77 institutions leading the way in 2015, and 83 courses available in 2023, popular music education is still new across Europe, mainly due to disagreement around what students need to learn and what popular music is (Coppes & Berkers, 2023). The lack of comparable curricula information amongst European institutions potentially dissuades students from making an informed enrolment choice, leaving the UK as the best option for a popular music future. However, post-Brexit, international students are no longer eligible for living expense loans, forcing them to work long hours to cover fees and living costs.

Many students talked about London with a romantic imagination that aligns with research showing its appeal for young creatives seeking thriving arts scenes, nightlife, diverse communities, and creative prospects (King et al., 2018; Favell, 2008). Alberto explained, "in Portugal, the representatives of companies like Warner and Universal are really, really small, so it's not a big thing for music, arts

and culture". While London has been the global music capital, it's also the most expensive city for fledgling musicians (Baker, 2019). Not all graduates will get jobs at big labels, and London's grassroots scenes, where young musicians and aspiring industry professionals can 'cut their teeth', are threatened by rising rents pricing out small venues and workspaces (Mayor of London, 2017). This raises the question as to whether this kind of information should be made available to prospective students, and how the issues are dealt with in curricula.

Though students perceived London as the city of possibilities, they were also becoming more realistic. Rachel said, "When it comes to music, London is where it's at, or at least, that's what we get told." Dana explained, "Apparently London is the city of dreams...But there's still always a lot of work to do. I don't expect to blow up here".

Leo shared the sentiment that "London is the realm of possibility" but added, "it is also an incredibly difficult place to live in when you're not middle class." Research shows the creative sector is dominated by the middle class and is not representative of the country (Oakley et al., 2017). Without wealth and contacts, it's hard to get by, especially for young migrant musicians with little support.

Most participants were supporting themselves while studying. Eleanor, an Italian student, emphasised the financial strain of sending money home, "I was literally counting the pennies because I was helping my mum in the meantime, and I didn't want to say no, because she needed that".

Structural inequality causes further strain, especially during the current cost of living crisis and housing shortage. Many of the participants described being faced not with excitement and creative possibilities, but intensely difficult housing situations rife with scams and instability. Alberto explained his first week in London:

When I got here, everything was different. We didn't have water in the shower for 5 days. We couldn't shower. The kitchen was destroyed, no floors. We had to buy everything to use in the house, and we discovered that the guy was subletting the house to make a profit. When we did finally find another place, we had to do a major contract, like 122 pages just to rent a shared room. I had to have a guarantor, it was insane. I even asked the agency like are you sure I'm not buying the house? I just want to rent the house!

Other students discovered they were living in tiny, mouldy, sub-let dwellings, with thin walls that prevented them from practicing music at home, and without a landlord, nothing was ever fixed. Jane described her inadequate housing situation:

There were five girls and one bathroom, and one girl just put all her stuff in the living room and made it into her bedroom. We couldn't even use it. My room was the smallest, and that was 660 pounds per month.

The housing shortage affected students' time for work, study, or career development. Jane explained the lengths to find better accommodation:

We had seven declined offers because of too many people wanting a place. You know, every 20 quid is very important for the landlord. So, he was waiting to have 20 different offers, that's 20 different groups of students. I was on the phone with agencies every day in June and July, I don't remember how many properties we saw, but it was a lot of them. There were times when there was a queue outside because of two days of viewings.

Overall, the findings revealed a transition from an idealised 'fantasy' of London to stark reality as creative migrants. Yet, most remained committed to building music careers long-term, compelled by the city's creative promise.

Financial Struggles, Time Poverty, and Impacts on Networking and Study

The findings revealed that almost all the students' financially strained situations and intensive work schedules significantly impacted their engagement with university studies and broader career development activities. Heavy workloads, often between 25-40 hours per week in service jobs, left minimal time for creative pursuits, networking events, society memberships, and other extracurricular activities that could advance careers. Elaine discussed her frustrations:

You know as a music student, as everybody in university says, I have to go out, you know, to gigs, discover, connect with people, make like networks, basically for my future. But I find it a bit hard just to cover all the fees, because I have no funding or anything, I have to work and most of the evening times. I can't go and network as much as I want.

This was a reality for Sally who worked through the night on a hotel front desk. She also discussed a lack of time to focus on her studies, "because of my schedule, my work, because I'm too busy to do my studies, I don't have time to go out and network, and this is crucial for musicians". On the other hand, Jason discussed a lack of time for a social life, but how he turned networking into a social activity, "I'm kind of focusing on going to networking events and panel talks, to keep my social life active and professional at the same time...most networking events are actually free". These kinds of stories and experiences would be a valuable addition to program culture within HPME institutions.

Participants also revealed the challenges of finding time to be a creative practitioner. Gemma talked about managing different roles or identities:

I don't have time to spend on music, it is just so weird because I come to uni, I actually get my creativity back, then I go to work, then I don't feel it anymore.

A disheartened Matt explained, "I haven't been writing a song in two or three weeks now, I haven't even been focusing on my studies. I'm not doing anything that I came here for". This was also similar to Michelle's experience:

I was not in the mindset. I didn't write a new song, and I was really upset because I didn't have time to do that. I also had to cook, do the laundry, the washing up, and it was crazy, I didn't have time to do anything except work and study.

These participants' identities are wrapped up in notions of what Burland et al. (2022) refer to as having a 'musical calling' emotional attachment and growth mindset, and it was a serious conflict for these students who felt as though they were failing at what they were 'called' to do.

These comments raise questions around how curricula might be better designed to facilitate more creative time and space for students. Two participants raised concerns about the relevance of content being taught during their course. Simon expressed his frustration:

I feel like the actual coursework a lot of the time raised my blood pressure to a very unnecessary level, when it really didn't add that much in terms of my skill set or my musical knowledge.

Rob, a gigging drummer who had been focusing his time on making connections and generating work explained that "I do uni work when I have time, but I put my outside work first, my uni work isn't as important as my other work". It was interesting to hear Rob discuss his entrepreneurial strategies:

So, from gigging the past year and a half since I came to London, I've met people who own or run venues. I've kept in touch with them specifically. There's one venue that struggles to get bands and artists, so the manager gets in touch with me a lot, so I book gigs for him, and I charge a fee. So, when I go to venues, I kind of try and make friends with the manager. If it's the first time we're going to a venue, I'll say to the manager, can I get your contact details, and then I just send an email the next day saying thank you for the gig, I'd love to keep in touch, and yes most of them do.

This begs the question, how might HPME course designers recognise this type of experience in our modules and assessment? Perhaps, a portfolio with accumulated evidence of industry engagement? Paid work and authentic assessment could address relevance for students, develop their career opportunities and provide them with the income they need to support themselves in this financial climate.

This section has shown that financially strained music students working long hours in service jobs lack time for networking, extracurriculars, and creative pursuits that could advance their careers. This prevents them from fully engaging in their studies and developing their musical identities. These findings confirm and extend prior literature emphasising the work-life balance challenges musicians face (Teague & Smith, 2015) by demonstrating how financial precarity and survival needs can create a time bind, which limits their ability to advance

their studies and develop critical professional networks during a pivotal training period (Zwaan et al., 2009).

Cultivating Resilience and Developing Life Skills

While the pressures and demands students described were exhausting and challenging, their struggles cultivated personal resilience and forged valuable life skills. Participants commented on how they were managing the rising costs of living. Lara, a mature age student from Italy explained:

I've noticed that prices have gone up 20 - 30%. When I go shopping it's crazy, from water to anything that used to be reasonably priced, now it's bloody expensive, it's just not affordable!

Other students reported the same. Caitlin, a music management student from Switzerland described her weekly groceries had expanded by at least 15%, and Leo noted eating out at restaurants was becoming a cheaper option than grocery shopping, "me and my partner, we have gotten to the point where we almost view eating out as the same as going shopping for groceries". Mary recalled the challenges she was having managing electricity and gas with her flatmates, "I have flatmates, and I just feel like they are living their wildest fantasy when it comes to electricity and heating everything". It was clear in Mary's interview, that through these rising costs, she had developed a greater awareness of what she once took for granted:

I come back home after work or uni and I come into the tropics, because the temperature in the house is set on the thermostat for 24 degrees...they usually leave the lights on for the night... I go to the kitchen and the lights are on everywhere. I actually didn't pay much attention to that before. But when the cost increases, I just started actually paying attention to that.

Similarly, Rachel explained her experience in terms of her transition to adulthood and independence:

everything lands on us, like toiletries and clothes, we're not living with our parents, if you come home hungry, you don't have your parents to say, oh we've got that in the fridge, or have you checked the cupboards? I come home now, and I know exactly what I've got because I've bought it and there's not much here!

Despite facing career uncertainty, these emerging musicians are developing financial resilience and resourcefulness that may serve them in their future careers. Sara mentioned, "every time I go shopping, I still have my calculator out, you can still save if you understand, like I keep a note of everything". Similarly, Mary noted, "I was doing a notebook where I was writing down all of the expenses and noting, ok, for this week, I have x amount", and Dean, a mature age student from Turkey explained, "I try to avoid using credit cards, I'd rather pay for things with cash or a debit card". Dean, like other students revealed, "I'm always on the

lookout for discounts and deals. London can be expensive, but there are ways to save if you're smart about it".

Making sacrifices was a common theme. Angie reflected, "you have to make sacrifices, and if my sacrifice is not going out on a Saturday night, yeah, it might be a few Saturdays", and similarly, Sarah admitted, "sometimes, I'm just skipping coffee because I don't have money, and just waiting for my salary". These sacrifices and financial strains seemed to create a greater resilience and determination in students. Angie recalled, "there were times when I would cry on the phone to my mum, why am I doing this? I shouldn't be here, but then I just always have that end goal". Sylvia also showed a similar focus, "it's not making me stressed, it's just, you know, I'm just setting myself up, Ok, I'll wait for tomorrow, it's gonna be a better day".

Students also developed a more grounded approach to music work. Dean explained the need to diversify:

I have three different bands, like one is Latin, another is a fusion, jazz rock thing, and one soul-Motown. On top of it are also like functions, weddings and I can't be picky if I want to pay the rent.

Sara is also diversifying her music career in the interests of supporting herself financially, "I've just taken on a lot of different kinds of work, I'm literally just singing kids songs at this point right now, but it pays really well". Furthermore, she demonstrates persistence, "if I work hard, and if I keep sending out things and pursuing things, I will keep getting jobs from it". Students were also realistic about how a music career might play out after graduation. Lara revealed long term plans that not only included her artistic pursuits, but furthering her career in related fields:

I need to think about something sensible to do alongside, and possibly something to do with my music tech background as well. So, mixing and stuff like that. It's a matter of building the structure that I need, and also the content that I need in order to advertise what I do.

Such narratives align with prior literature suggesting that to withstand careers characterized by precarity; emerging musicians must proactively cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets and resourcefulness (Bennett, 2009; Tolmie, 2020).

Similar to King et. al's (2018) findings on the motivations and experiences of early-career graduates from the Baltic States, the participants in my study also discussed their experiences of migration to London as a 'rite of passage' to adulthood, a series of life lessons and becoming a global citizen. Eleanor reflected:

London makes you deal, not with Londoners, or English people, but with everyone in the world, and that's probably the best thing that could have happened, because back home it really is not like that.

Similarly, Jane and Dana described how living in London was giving them an opportunity to look at the world with a different mindset to the one they were exposed to back home. They explained:

I love how different everything is here and how different people are here...it's not Poland, where there's like so many racist people, or people that have a huge problem with like LGBTQ+ community, everyone can be themselves...This is my safe space to do what I want to do first...yeah, I'm growing up here. (Jane)

There's more close-mindedness at home, people never left the state, Texas is all they know. It's a bit more open minded here because there are so many cultures here. It's easy to learn about new cultures, and new things. (Dana)

Empathy has been considered the moral glue that holds civil society together (Calloway-Thomas et al. 2017), and in higher popular music education, we seldom identify empathy and intercultural competence as skills or attributes required for music careers. Perhaps greater consideration of the experiences of migrant musicians within curricular design might go a long way to graduating students who are conscious of stereotypes and prejudices, and cultural differences in the pursuit of a more equitable and just music industry.

All the participants in this study experienced great hardship but considered this aspect of their migration as an opportunity for growth and development. Sara revealed, "I wouldn't change anything, even the hard times, it taught me a lot, it's worth the money". Eleanor explained how hardship helped her learn time management:

I faced some tough times, but I didn't let that discourage me. I sought help, adjusted my study methods and pushed through...there were times when I felt overwhelmed by the workload, but I always found a way to manage my time effectively and stay on track. I believe that setbacks are just opportunities to learn and grow...so even when things didn't go as planned, I kept a positive attitude and kept moving forward.

Students also demonstrated self-efficacy in the way they overcame obstacles. Elaine explained, "I have proved to myself that I'm actually capable of something even bigger than I thought...go out of your comfort zone, I love it". Similarly, Jane beamed, "nobody ever knows if they can make it out from situations until they are actually put in the situation by life. I never thought that I will be able to manage all of those things".

Dana and Kyle both arrived in London after facing personal challenges. They both reflected on how this migration experience pulled them out of depression and dark times. Cancer survivor, Dana, reflected, "living in London, I really learned to live for today. I'm usually always thinking in the future, and now I'm like, no, be here, be present, that's the time that matters right now". Kyle talked about the stigma attached to pursuing a creative career in India:

I had to drop all the assumptions I had made about what it would take to look or be successful. In my country it's a silly nuance, but for someone who comes from a small town, being a music events manager, there is this major chunk of social rejection that your family has to go through.

Kyle continued to explain, "I have 52 weeks to turn my life around, that's less than 2% of my lifespan, a reasonable enough risk to take, even if it feels like a difficult road to walk".

Across this section of the data, the participants have demonstrated resilience to overcome challenges, identifying themselves as learners who understand the role that learning plays in making a better future. This has resulted in an improved sense of self-belief. Berntson and Marklund (2007) correlate graduate success with self-beliefs or efficacy beliefs, and Burland and Bennett (2022) relate self-reliance, adaptability, and a growth mindset to having the motivation to overcome the challenges of the music profession. This development of resilience through adversity aligns with recent research on international student experiences in UK higher education where one study found that while international students face significant challenges, these experiences often lead to increased self-confidence and intercultural competence, contributing to their personal and professional development (Carrica-Ochoa & Brown, 2024). Certainly, in the case of this research, overcoming hardship seems to motivate students to persevere with their goals for a music career.

The Critical Role of Peer Networks for Opportunity and Support

Peer networks emerged as vital sources of collaborative opportunities, industry access, and moral support. This social capital development occurs through two key pathways for international students - intrapersonally through self-awareness and self-regulation, and interpersonally through building networks and developing social skills (Tokas et al., 2023). As Michelle described:

Networking with your classmates, who I'm still in contact with, was everything. Whenever I had to write a song or to play, we could always work together, and I didn't do the music industry course, but some of my classmates did, and they had a good networking connection that I could tap into.

Similarly, Rob discussed the importance of developing strong connections with classmates, and how tapping into what Granovetter (1973) describes as weaker ties within a network, enabled further connections and social capital:

I can get musicians at the drop of a hat...they started as university contacts, and now they've graduated, I've met people they've met. So, I've now kind of expanded even more.

Leo emphasised meeting 'like-minded people' passionate about music at university as impactful for his creative development and knowledge, "I've never had so much opportunity, I've never had that many people around me who were

prepared to try and push music and be in the industry". Sara shared this appreciation for peer connections, "I've been able to meet so many amazing, incredible musicians that got me all the stuff that I've been able to do now after uni". These findings confirm prior research emphasising peer networks as critical catalysts for career development and opportunity among emerging musicians (Zwaan et al., 2009).

However, the data highlighted how financial precarity and work demands constrain this crucial area of growth. Elaine described lacking meaningful time to connect with peers amidst busy schedules, "it was hard to find people who are open to work...everyone is still focused on their work and their hours, so it's hard to create this kind of community". Anna, another student of popular music management, criticized her course for not providing networking opportunities, "I think you should have some sort of practice semester where they actually force you to get an internship because that's where you learn a lot about the industry." She questioned the university's 'industry-connected' claims, "if you have that many connections, why don't you help us to get those connections because you call yourself a career university". This aligns with Teague and Smith (2015) who advocate for HPME to promote realistic career expectations rather than narrow notions of success afforded a lucky few.

While peer networks proved vital for early career development, participants emphasised their peers' significance in providing social and emotional support during migration. Flatmates often took on familial roles. During the stressful search for housing, Jane recalled, "whenever one of us was like, completely down, we were just there for each other", and Rob shared a similar experience, "our flatmate was crying in the living room for an hour and a half because she had sixty pounds to live off for the whole month, so we're helping". Dana emphasised how easy it was finding the right support network in London:

Finding the right support within people, it makes it easier to survive with whatever struggles you're going through...I feel like it's my home, like all the people that I've met here have been just there in the right time and right space.

The critical importance of peer support networks for international students has been documented in other UK contexts. Carrica-Ochoa & Brown (2024) found that strong social connections were fundamental for international students' successful adaptation and emotional wellbeing, particularly in managing cultural transition. In music careers specifically, Zwaan et al. (2009) showed early career development depends heavily on social support from family, partners, and peers. Building strong peer networks in London has motivated participants to stay focused on their goals.

Leo's reflection captured a deeper learning about creative collaboration, "I've become more mature, and more understanding of how people work and how they interact with other people". HPME institutions, especially in London, can facilitate collaborations that celebrate cultural diversity, often developing unhighlighted skills in empathy, intercultural awareness, and communication. However, research suggests universities must actively support international

student integration. Mohamad and Manning (2024) emphasize this requires 'proactive endeavour' and organized social opportunities (p. 30), as integration doesn't occur naturally. This particularly applies to music institutions, where collaborative opportunities should be intentionally structured to maximize international students' development.

Should I stay or should I go?

Despite London's challenges, most participants planned to stay long-term to develop their music careers, citing the city's unmatched creative infrastructure, opportunities, and networks. Some, however, considered relocating to more affordable cities, while maintaining London connections. As Caitlin noted, "cities like Berlin are much cheaper, and have creative communities, but London is the global music industry". Others viewed their London experience as preparation for returning home, potentially countering 'brain drain' (Mok & Han, 2016) through knowledge transfer. Dee envisioned catalyzing change, "the first step is to get the experience so then I can go back to Portugal and try to change the industry". Gemma shared similar aspirations for Romania, "at least you learn some things and then come back to Romania to just develop everything more there".

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the motivations for and experiences of emerging musicians migrating to London for education and career opportunities. In addressing the research questions, the study makes several empirical arguments. First, despite idealised perceptions, students encountered financial precarity, work-life struggles, and time poverty that threatened their studies, creative practice, and networking. However, hardship also cultivated transferable skills and grit translatable to future creative careers. Additionally, strong peer networks afforded collaborative opportunities and comfort. Finally, the data revealed personal growth and identity transitions indicative of an important rite of passage.

While revealing how creativity perseveres during adversity, the study raises concerns about students merely surviving rather than thriving in London. This study holds significance for mobility research and music education during an unsettled era by giving voice to emerging creatives in a pivotal life stage. These findings suggest several critical ways HPME could better support migrant music students.

First, European institutions need a more consistent, aligned approach to popular music programs. This alignment would provide students with accessible information to make informed choices about study locations beyond London. Additionally, institutions must address the complexities of operating in London through flexible delivery, affordable access, and remote learning options that free up student time. Alongside these structural changes, institutions should foster funding access, collaborations, peer support, and global perspectives to help students navigate adversity.

The findings also suggest opportunities to enhance curriculum and career development. Entrepreneurial curricula could cultivate the resilience and resources students need to manage protean careers. For example, student-run record labels offer real-world music industry experience and networking while addressing barriers to traditional internships. Furthermore, tailored career advice would help set realistic expectations, acknowledging that while widespread fame may be rare, students can create sustainable careers by managing diverse opportunities over time.

Institutions can also leverage their international student communities more effectively. Promoting student sharing of diverse musical heritages and experiences develops intercultural competencies valuable in global music industries. This approach helps students recognize how their London experiences build transferable human capital beyond music skills.

This paper makes an original, empirical contribution that advances knowledge on an important yet under-examined student population. The findings enrich our understanding of popular musician migration, training, resilience, identity, and mobility during the transition to adulthood. It is also timely given its focus on the recent cost-of-living crisis in London. This holds significance for music educators, creative labour researchers, and policy makers.

Future research could expand these insights through longitudinal studies tracking how emerging musicians' careers progress after graduating, and examining how music students might leverage London's creative infrastructure to benefit their home countries. Comparing the experiences of UK domestic versus international student migrants could also highlight different support needs.

While recognizing the challenges, London still powerfully retains its appeal in students' imaginations as offering creative career development pathways unavailable elsewhere. However, whether emerging musicians can truly thrive there, rather than merely survive, remains uncertain.

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