



23 November 2023

Dear Vice-Chancellor Prof. Fitt, the Vice-Chancellor's group, and Board of Governors,

We write to you regarding the proposed closure of the music department and 'teaching out' of its programmes, which has caused alarm, distress and shock across our communities.

In the recent days, members of our respective committees have made public statements in support of our colleagues and your students, including on social media, online petitions, in radio interview, and in online articles and newsletters. More are to follow in the coming days. Indeed, the wider support for the OBU Music Department amongst colleagues in academia, music education and the wider music profession and creative industries has provided your colleagues at OBU with a profound sense that their research, teaching and wider cultural impact is met with the recognition that its excellence deserves. But perhaps the most emotionally wrought and impactful stories have been those shared by current and past students, whose experiences of being taught in your music department have enriched lives and shaped careers within the music industry and, crucially, far beyond.

As the main academic bodies representing HE music in the UK, we are particularly concerned about the impact that this will have on the diversity of music provision in the UK, both in terms of student access, regional engagement, and subject expertise. None of us is blind to the challenges of student recruitment, university finance and government policy. We understand that your decision will not have been taken lightly and that the health of music studies is unlikely to be your primary concern; we recognise, too, that letters of disapproval and statements of online protest, including any potential reputational damage for OBU, will have been factored into your decision-making. While it is not our place to worry that the true extent of reputational damage may not have been foreseen, we would appreciate the opportunity to set out the value of music as a discipline, as well as some of the complexity of musical education and graduate outcomes in the UK, which can make it difficult for those outside of music to interpret its value for students, graduates – and universities.

The study of music within universities offers students and graduates the opportunity to develop a rich array of employability skills and – crucially – transferable work experiences within their programmes, all of which are crucial for enabling graduates to navigate the uncertain future of work. We echo the AHA in citing Andy Haldane, the former Chief Economist, Bank of England, who in an interview on Sky News on 23 April 2023 said: 'What will protect us from the rise of AI is our creative capacity as human beings [...] we have seen the dwindling budgets for arts and humanities [...] that is a big mistake for the jobs and skills of the future'. It seems clear to us that you recognise this truth, given that, as stated on your website, your exciting new building will '[bring] together STEM and creative industries activity'.

The value of music to the wider UK economy show that there is room too to think about how the research and teaching in your music department contributes to the regional, national and international music industry, broadly defined. According to [UKMusic](#), 'the music industry contributed £6.7 billion to the UK economy during 2022 in terms of gross value added (GVA). Exports topped £4 billion, and employment stood at 210,000.' The industry is dynamic and fast-changing, and the creativity,



technological literacy and criticality at the heart of the OBU music courses plays an important role in enabling your music graduates to adapt to this change, whether it is in music or beyond.

It is important to emphasise here that there is no one career path or graduate destination for music students. There is a common misconception that musical training implies a career in the music industry, but here the rule that applies to all arts and humanities graduates applies to music graduates too. And for those graduates that do pursue careers in the music and creative industries, it is also important to note that such careers can take time to develop: as entrepreneurial workers with portfolio careers, salary and employment data can be misleading when captured 15 months following graduation. In a world of increasing cross-disciplinary research and study, we urge you to consider the wider transferability and potential of music as a subject.

The ecosystem of music in UK higher education offers an unusually rich variety of courses for the study of music. Each department and conservatoire has its own specialisms, including particular areas of strength in programmes offered, research conducted, or areas of music which might be studied (for example, opera studies or sound on screen). This ecosystem is what makes the UK such a special, and respected, place to train the next generation of music students and creative industry leaders. And the variety allows potential students to choose where to study based on their own needs (geographical, financial) and passions (research area of interest, modules on offer). We cannot emphasise the importance of access and diversity strongly enough. Music and the arts cannot remain the preserve of just the most privileged in society, a point that is widely accepted and at the heart of the DfE's recently revised National Plan for Music Education. To this point, it is also worth emphasising that although the future for music recruitment has in recent times been publicly discussed as being in crisis, there is no crisis in the overall numbers of students wishing to pursue music in higher education: there are only changes in the kinds of music and skills that students wish to pursue and the landscape of providers offering music programmes. There is, for example, no competition between what your department currently provides or could provide and that provided by the Faculty of Music at Oxford University. We say this to highlight flourishing recent developments at Northumbria University, Manchester Metropolitan University and Salford University, all of which carefully position what they offer in relation to local competition in cities that attract students from across the world.

Within this context, your department has internationally recognised strengths in sound on screen, electronic composition and opera studies that are particularly fruitful areas for future development and collaboration, including with partners beyond academia. Indeed, we are aware that productive conversations have been ongoing between department, school and faculty levels to create a revised portfolio of programmes that will meet the future developments of musical study in the twenty-first century, centring on new interdisciplinary models that fit the aspirations embodied by your exciting new building and its performance space. Therefore, it seems counter-intuitive to close the department and cut all staff just at the moment when a new direction is being charted. And whereas plans are being made to relocate your colleagues in mathematics to other areas of the university, we are keen to see how the excellence fostered in your music department could yet be reconfigured and your music staff retained.



During the last seven years of uncertainty and upheaval, most notably during COVID, music has proven all the more vital for wellbeing, motivation and hope for a better future (e.g. research conducted during the lockdown provided stronger evidence than ever of [the impact of music on reducing loneliness](#), [the value of singing together](#), and [the importance of music in bringing people together](#)). Collectively we have turned to the arts to get us through a very difficult time across the world. Closing a Music department at this time would be wholly regrettable. Because without a music department, or at the very least a subject area in which coherent clusters of research, teaching and innovation are fostered, you will be reduced to offering music only as a student-society ‘extra-curricular’ activity. This would be a travesty given the intellectual and cultural impact produced by your department over the years, and the potential for your colleagues and students to contribute to the interdisciplinary present and future.

We write to you in the spirit of collegiality and stand ready to engage with you in the hope that this painful decision can be overturned and alternative plans put in place – plans which are already underway within your music department and which will help meet the interdisciplinary mission of your university.

We would be grateful for the opportunity to meet with you and your colleagues from the music department to discuss alternative plans, urgently and as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Roddy Hawkins (Chair, MusicHE)

Prof. Barbara Kelly (President, Royal Musical Association)

Dr Christopher Tarrant (President, Society for Music Analysis)

Prof. Byron Dueck (Chair, British Forum for Ethnomusicology)

Prof Simon Zargorski-Thomas (Co-Chair, International Association for the Study of Popular Music, UK and Ireland)