Cardiff's music closure will hasten the fading out of UK musical scholarship

Most courses are already performance- or employment-focused. The demise of another scholarly programme will skew the balance further, says Ian Pace

Times Higher Education
Published on February 17, 2025
Last updated February 17, 2025
Ian Pace
Twitter: @drianpace

In a recent radio interview, Cardiff University's vice-chancellor, Wendy Larner, defended her proposal to drop music degrees (among others) by arguing that "there are two music schools in Cardiff" and that "in a context where resources are so constrained, the sector cannot afford to compete in the way it has historically".

The point about competition may well be true. But Larner's statement rests on the misperception that one music degree is much like another – and that, therefore, all music programmes are in competition for students. The reality is very different, and that is why so many musicians and academics have been voicing their unhappiness at the bleak prospect now faced by Cardiff's sizeable and highly respected School of Music (where I did my own PhD, and briefly taught). A petition to save it has so far received over 24,000 signatures.

There are five institutions in Wales that currently offer music degrees – Cardiff and Bangor universities; the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (RWCMD); the college's parent institution, the University of South Wales, which offers a few other music degrees of its own; and University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

It is vital to understand the difference between these. Cardiff and Bangor alone offer what I categorise as *scholarly* undergraduate degrees in music, encompassing the study of history, theory and analysis, aesthetics, contextual study, global musics and sometimes more specialist areas, such as acoustics or sound studies. Many in the discipline have long believed that academic study is enhanced by some degree of practical engagement, so performance and composition are usually options in these types of degrees, but they are only a part of them.

This is in strong contrast to *conservatoire* courses. These are primarily about training professional musicians – in the RWCMD's case, in classical music and jazz, though some other conservatoires offer training in wider popular music. Larner was presumably referring to the RWCMD when she referred to the two music schools in Cardiff, but the difference between her university's offering and RWCMD's is akin to that between scholarly study of Shakespeare at, say, the University of Warwick and training to be a Shakespearean actor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Other universities offer different *vocational* courses in music technology and production, aimed at those intending to work in recording or other studio work, musical theatre or popular music performance. There are also a handful of other types of courses, such as those in *music business*, which are for training administrators and managers. All the degree courses offered at South Wales and Trinity Saint David fall into these two categories. So do those offered by the high-recruiting private providers, in which musicology plays very little part – but none of these are based in Wales.

Cardiff's music department is one of the most distinguished scholarly institutions in the country, with total undergraduate cohorts of between 185 and 205 between 2019-20 and 2022-23 – compared with 120 or fewer at many other departments. It accounts for 77 and 63 per cent respectively of total scholarly undergraduate and postgraduate provision in Wales. It has in recent years been home to arguably the UK's leading scholars of Liszt, Stravinsky and Janáček, not to mention pioneering, world-leading scholars of Mendelssohn, historical performance, music in Vienna, and both 19th- and 20th-century French music and opera. It also has major scholars of popular music, of Turkish and Yoruba traditions, and several prominent contemporary composers.

This type of academic provision is very much the exception rather than the rule. Fewer than 20 per cent of music undergraduates at UK universities are now enrolled on scholarly programmes. If students at conservatoires or private providers are taken into account, the proportion is even lower. And scholarly provision is still falling.

From 2017 to 2023 alone, universities including Kent, Derby, Kingston, Chester, Keele and City have closed their scholarly offerings in favour of a concentration on vocational subjects (Kent has closed music altogether, as have Abertay Dundee, Cumbria, Wolverhampton and Oxford Brookes during the same period). In some cases this has led to a decline rather than increase in enrolment.

The mid-ranking universities (neither Russell Group nor post-92) can struggle to find a distinct identity for their music provision and too often end up in the irreconcilable situation of attempting to maintain a research-based faculty to teach students who want to be taught by those with commercial industry experience – whose activities rarely overlap with what universities would consider research.

Meanwhile, even students on scholarly degrees expect to have at least the option of individual performance tuition. But this is a significant expense and is not deliverable by most scholars. As I have previously outlined, music degrees at Lancaster were abolished by the larger faculty into which music had been subsumed after the faculty's cuts to performance tuition made them unviable.

We should not be surprised by the confusion all this complexity of provision can cause to senior university managers – not to mention potential students, parents, politicians and the wider public. And we should not be surprised that the closure of scholarly-focused departments in favour of practical ones has followed from a corrosion of the boundaries between scholarship and practice to a degree unmatched in other countries.

Cardiff's School of Music is the latest example. But unless that boundary is shored up, it is unlikely to be the last.

Ian Pace is professor of music, culture and society and university adviser: interdisciplinarity at City St George's, University of London. He is writing in a personal capacity.