



## TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM OF POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES IN SCOTLAND: CURRENT FRAMEWORK, PROBLEMS AND FUTURE POTENTIAL

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### Abstract:

Transversal competences - alternatively referred as '21st century skills' and 'key competencies' is a term rigorously discussed within the international research and education community since the beginning of the century. However, two major challenges remain, such as how to efficiently integrate the concept of transversal competencies into existing programmes, as well as how to assess transversal competences across the curriculum. It is important to recognise the potential for applying the concept of transversal competences to popular music curricula, as this multidisciplinary field combines all three aspects: broader creative sphere (musicianship, composition, cultural and contextual analysis); social sphere (economics, sociology, anthropology, history, communications and management), and technologies. This multidisciplinary fusion of spheres opens the possibility of applying the findings of this inquiry to curricula of other fields. Thus, resulting in the frame of reference for integration and assessment of transversal competencies into existing curricula of creative higher education. The geographical scope of this discussion is limited to Scotland. However, contextual analysis of EU policy documents and global social tendencies will be discussed. This inquiry aims to examine the current framework, problems, and future potential of transversal competences in popular music higher education programmes across Scotland. The primary goal of this study is to assess the programmes in connection with the integration of the transversal competence approach, particularly the progress, the limitations and the future potential.

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## 1. Introduction

For the last decade the European Union (EU) as well as the majority of national education policy changes and documents emphasise the importance of transformation of education systems and more importantly their goals and values, to address the problems of ever-evolving socio-economic and technological ecosystems of the 21st century. The transformation was aimed to target the issues concerning education, as Cepic, et al. note: *“to increase the qualification levels of all learners and to prevent drop-outs, which involves, among other measures, teaching more transversal, general thinking skills”* (2015). Historically, the term ‘transversal competences’ has been associated with professional and adult education, mainly due to its roots in vocational education, labour, market and other economic inquiries. Halasz and Michel emphasised *“some Member States started devising and implementing education policies that were oriented towards competence development long before the adoption of the European Recommendation. This happened, typically, first in the field of vocational education and training, where the competences to be developed could be defined on the basis of occupational analyses with the active involvement of employers”*<sup>ii</sup> (2011).

The definition of transversal or key competences often described as problematic, vague and fluid. Alternative terms, such as skills, key skills, competencies, abilities, capacities and transferable skills are alternatively used in this context. For the purposes of this discussion, a definition offered by the [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training](#) will be applied and discussed. CEDEFOP defines ‘skill’ as *“the ability to perform tasks and solve problems”*, but defines ‘basic skills’ *“as the skills needed to live in our contemporary society (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and mathematics)”* (CEDEFOP, 2008). However, it defines ‘competence’ as *“the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development). Competence is not limited to cognitive elements; it also encompasses functional aspects (involving technical skills) as well as interpersonal attributes (social or organisational skills) and ethical values”* (CEDEFOP, 2008).

Since the 1990s, the term ‘competence’ became closely interconnected with the field education. The curricula of general academic education, especially of both - secondary and tertiary levels shifted their focus and values from a more focused

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<sup>ii</sup> For original source see: Stanton, G., & Bailey, B. (2004).

concept of knowledge attainment to a broader concept of attitudes, behaviours, abilities, skills, capacities, values and all-encompassing competences.

The concept of transversal competences as we know it today began to form in Europe in the early 1970s. First, the notion of the concept began to shape in 1972 in E. Faure's report 'Learning to be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow', where he introduced two main ideologies – 'lifelong education' and 'the learning society'. Later in 1994 OECD published a report '*Redéfinir le curriculum: un enseignement pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*' where a vision of the 21st century curriculum, emphasising the importance of cross-curricular competences was presented. As Halasz, Michel cited: "*requirement of a basic core curriculum that provided every student with a 'survival kit' in terms of knowledge, competences and values*" (2011).

In 1996 UNESCO published "Learning: The Treasure Within" or widely known as 'The Delors Report'. This report was specifically prepared for UNESCO by an independent commission (chaired by Jacques Delors). Later the report will be considered the keystone for the notion of "*conceptualization of education and learning worldwide*" (Tawil, Caugoreux, 2013), as well as the modern concept of transversal and cross-curricular competence approach. The report further broadens the concept of 'Learning through life' already presented in the Faure's Report. It is important to emphasise that in Delors report the distinction between the general schooling and adult education is erased. "*with the lifelong learning paradigm set as a backdrop, the report is based on four pillars summarising education and life: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together*" (Tawil, Caugoreux, 2013).

A decade later, in 2006 European Parliament and Council of the European Union published the 'European Union Framework of Key Competencies for Life Long Learning'. This framework highlights "*important skills that are required in order to lead meaningful, productive and sustainable lives*" (Cepic, et al. 2015). The report formulates eight key competences:

1. communication in the mother tongue,
2. communication in a foreign language,
3. mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology,
4. digital competence,
5. learning to learn,
6. social and civic competence,
7. sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and
8. cultural awareness and expression.

It is also emphasised that all eight competences should be regarded as equal and that one must take into consideration that the set of competences highlighted in the

report represents a vision at a given moment in time and that many other competences could also have been identified as significant. For instance, the *“ability to realise what is essential and what is unimportant the capacity to set priorities, to respect time schedules and deadlines, to be aware of one’s limits or ignorance, to have a sense of foresight”* (Halasz, Michel, 2011).

However, there is a clear distinction between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ competences, or in other words, the subject based competences and the cross-curricular competences. Both author teams Gordon, et al. (2009) and Halasz, Michel (2011) underline the interrelation between the eight key competences defined in the ‘European Union Framework of Key Competencies for Life Long Learning’. The first three competences (communication in the mother tongue, communication in a foreign language, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology), are easier to define as the ‘traditional’ or ‘old’ competences, as they are linked to the framework of the subject based curriculum. Yet, the other five key competences (digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competence, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and cultural awareness and expression) are much more fluid and interconnected, thus, cross-curricular. As Amadio suggests: these five competences *“tend to need a higher degree of cross-curricular organization, and the ‘themes’ of the EU Framework are seen as transversal competences or skills”* (Amadio, 2013). Additionally, Pepper, notes on the European Reference Framework, that *“any further interpretation is left to the Member States in the specific contents of their education systems”* (2011). Which directly results in different definitions, goals, frameworks, and integration progress of the transversal competence approach across Europe.

In Scotland, the ‘curriculum for excellence’ was developed over the period of 2005-2008, to be implemented over the course of 2009-2014 was directed towards transversal competences. As Halasz, Michel noted, it was aimed to *“enable young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. Moreover, the whole content of the curriculum is designed as a ‘set of experiences and outcomes’: experiences to develop attitudes and capabilities, and achieve active engagement, motivation and depth of learning, and outcomes to represent what is to be achieved”* (2011).

This discussion aims to examine the current framework, problems and future potential of transversal competences in popular music higher education programmes offered in Scotland. The primary goal of this study is to assess the programmes in connection with the integration of the transversal competence approach, particularly the progress, the limitations and the future potential.

## 2. Methodology

Qualitative methodology was used, which included a mix of primary or empirical research in the form of interviews, and secondary desk research, which involved review and contextualisation of already published literature, and analysis of the gathered data. It is important to discuss the methodology and methods used in conducting this research, the reasons for adopting them, as well as some of the limiting and surrounding issues.

Qualitative research is often defined in contrast to quantitative research, as Eriksson and Kovalainen explained: *“Many qualitative approaches are concerned with interpretation and understanding, whereas many quantitative approaches deal with the explanation, testing of hypothesis, and statistical analysis”* (2008). Likewise, Ghauri and Gronhaug noted: *“Qualitative research is particularly relevant when prior insights about a phenomenon under scrutiny are modest, implying that qualitative research tends to be exploratory and flexible because of ‘unstructured problems (due to the modest insights)’”* (2005). Also, Eriksson and Kovalainen pointed out one of the major interests of qualitative research approach is *“understanding reality as socially constructed: produced and interpreted through cultural meanings”* (2008).

For this study a qualitative research method was used; thus, the insights gained from the interviews are the most valuable aspect of this inquiry, and they shall serve as the key evidence in attempting to find the answers for this complex discourse. Furthermore, to multiply the productivity and efficiency of this approach, the practical research adopted a variety of forms: one-to-one, structured and semi-structured individual interviews by means of electronic mail and face to face discussions.

### 2.1 Interviews

The interviews were conducted in 2016 face to face, followed by structured e-mail follow-up interviews and a thorough programme document analysis. Altogether, educators and course leaders of four Scottish universities were interviewed, including Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow University, University of the Highlands and Islands, and the University of West Scotland.

All of the interviews conducted were semi-structured, with a list of issues to be covered during the discussion, yet only used as what Daymon and Holloway call an *‘aide-mémoire’* (2010). It should be noted that written e-mail interviews were more dependent on the structure of the questions than the live interviews, where a more real-time engagement is possible.

As Thomas noted in his book on research methodology for education and social sciences: *“Interview schedule, drawn up prior to the interview, is a framework of issues, leading to possible questions, leading to possible follow-up questions, leading to ‘probes’”* (2009). Still, the ‘interview schedule’ was merely there for direction, and included a broad spectrum of varying themes. As such, there was plenty of opportunities for independent interpretation depending on the personal perspective and experience of the interviewees.

### 3. Results

There are a number of significant interconnected factors when attempting to understand the current framework, problems and future potential of transversal competences in higher popular music education in Scotland. These include a thorough investigation of the origins of the transversal competence approach in education, as well as a broader understanding of popular music history in higher education in the UK<sup>iii</sup>. However, the principal goal of this inquiry is to highlight and study the problems as well as limitations, and through that, to formulate the future potential for transversal competence approach in higher popular music education.

Before going into a detailed analysis, it must be noted that however across all levels of education in Europe it is still a challenge for programme leaders and educators to integrate transversal competences into the existing curricula efficiently. This inquiry has revealed that transversal competence approach is not merely successfully integrated, but rather embedded in the core of the curriculum of popular music higher education across Scotland. This is partly the case, because of its rather short history in academia, as programmes were developed from the beginning with the concept of ‘key competences’ as the core. Popular music first was included in Scottish higher education curriculum in 2001 (University of Paisley and Edinburgh Napier University). Since then, it has grown into a respectable academic field, led by world-recognised research pioneers like Simon Frith and Martin Cloonan, taught across four universities: Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow University, University of the Highlands and Islands, and the University of West Scotland; with an abundant variety of courses and specialties.

However, when popular music was brought into universities in Scotland before the programmes were formed, it was often included as an additional course or module within the classical music programmes, as to broaden students’ experiences, thus

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<sup>iii</sup> See autor’s earlier paper on “Popular Music Education in Great Britain: Programmes, Approaches and Problems”, 2015; [http://www.rpiva.lv/pdf/JZK\\_XI.pdf](http://www.rpiva.lv/pdf/JZK_XI.pdf); p.99.

directly stimulating the acquisition of cross-curricular competences. Also, not much later, once popular music in higher education has grown into independent programmes, separate from classical music, it was essentially possible due to socio-cultural and technological changes, as well as the growing market demand for both industry professionals and academic research.

### 3.1 The current framework

**Table 1:** Popular music in higher education in Scotland in 2016

Institution	Degree & length of the programme	Qualification and name of the programme	Type of the programme (analytical, critical, industry based, practical)
Edinburgh Napier University	Undergraduate; 4 years (with Honours)	BA (Hons) Creativity through music	practical, critical and analytical, industry
University of Glasgow	Postgraduate; 1 year (2 years part time)	MLitt; The Music Industries	Critical and analytical, industry
University of the Highlands and Islands	Undergraduate 4; years (with Honours) (8 years part time)	BA (Hons) Popular Music	Practical, critical and analytical, industry
University of West Scotland	Undergraduate 4; years (with Honours)	BA (Hons) Commercial Music	Practical, critical and analytical, industry

Analysis of the programme documents, as well as cross-examination of the interview responses, constructs a clear vision for the framework of popular music higher education in Scotland, (see Table 1). Across the four universities, there are three undergraduate programmes and one postgraduate programme, at the moment. In terms of qualifications there is very little distinction across the undergraduate level, as all programmes award Bachelor of Arts (BA) in 3 years, and Bachelor of Arts with Honours (BA Hons) in 4 years, while the postgraduate diploma of Master of Letters (MLitt) in 1 year (full time). Programmes can be described as both interdisciplinary and even multidisciplinary, as often include practical (musicianship), critical, analytical and industry aspects. This also directly corresponds with the variety of skills required for admission to popular music programmes, as for instance, Edinburgh Napier University programme requires ABRSM, Grade 5 theory, instrument skills, composition skills and experience, technological competence (Pro Tools, Logic), music business, history, community business.

Another broader theme that interlocked all interviews are the goals of the programmes, or in other words the values these programmes cultivate in their graduates. In an interview, one of the course leaders highlighted ‘transferable skills’ as

the main priority, 'preparing for life – not for a job'. The core variety of transversal competences and more detailed skills that are highlighted across the interview responses include: problem solving, critical innovative thinking, interpersonal skills, networking, positivity and well-being, balancing realism with optimism, as well as well-read and well-practiced instrument technique, high creative abilities, technological competences, and entrepreneurial skills.

Other ways that transversal competences are stimulated within popular music higher education programmes across Scotland is the emphasis on experiences, cooperation and innovation. All of the programmes discussed include either industry placement experiences, or interdisciplinary cooperation experiences, such as interdepartmental projects. For instance, interdisciplinary cooperation experience provided by means of incorporating and combining music management module with Business school's Festival and Event module, where all students work together as a team to organise and promote an event. Another example of both interdisciplinary experiences and interdepartmental cooperation are film music modules, where students from film studies and popular music programmes come together to create innovative projects.

#### **4. Problems**

When examining the problems highlighted by the educators, yet again the problems highlight in national context across the nations in Europe, is not the case with popular music higher education in Scotland. As emphasised earlier, assessment of transversal competences is one of the most extensively discussed problems in Europe. On the contrary, interviewed educators and course leaders responded with confidence, innovative elasticity to the challenges of assessment.

When asked to highlight problems that they have encountered during the programmes' development, a number of issues had come to light, such as keeping the programme dynamic in a team, communication and management of change in a team. Subsequently, placement arrangements are described as delicate and risky affairs. Next, the problem of costly technical requirements of the programmes, including costly specialist facility upgrades and designing the space from zero (e.g. studio equipment, soundproofing, acoustics). Thus, this problem directly leads to another, the cost of the studies themselves. As one of the Edinburgh Napier University educators commented - it is too expensive for overseas students to come to study with us, there is a very low number of overseas students, approximately one student per year.

The problem that challenges the transversal competence approach entirely, as emphasised by one of the Edinburgh Napier University educators is modular thinking, as it stimulates the compartmentalisation of knowledge and limits with skills and competences acquired in through the learning process.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Future potential**

To conclude the discussion it is important point out that in broader European and various national contexts two major challenges that essentially fostered this inquiry still remain – the integration of transversal competencies, as well as the assessment across the curricula and teacher training. As the programme document analysis and interview responses have indicated, this is not the case with popular music higher education programmes in Scotland. The current methodologies concerning both curriculum design and teaching approaches are deeply interlocked with the transversal competences approach. Another factor that encourages the acquisition of transversal competences is the elasticity of assessment approaches and methodologies in practice, which reflect the shift in goals and values towards the metacognitive competences, aiming to stimulate innovation, individuality, as well as to promote confidence and creativity.

Concerning the framework, it is important to recognise the potential of the programmes, particularly for the multidisciplinary experiences that they offer, including placement opportunities and interdepartmental cooperation projects. As it is exactly the hands-on industry experience, and an abundance of transversal (cross-curricular) competences that students acquire make these graduates better equipped to compete for jobs in the industry, as well as requalify into new spheres in the future - better equipped for life.

This multidisciplinary fusion of spheres encourages the notion of applying the findings of the inquiry to programmes in other fields. Thus, on the whole, this discussion proposes a frame of reference for integration and assessment of transversal competencies for programmes in higher education.

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