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## Tuition fees, entrance examinations and misconceptions about equity in higher music education

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### Abstract

The increasing participation rate in higher education has raised its own issues, such as how to fund the growth while retaining the quality of education. In Finland, it has been argued that the tuition-free higher education policy increases equality. On the other hand, in the United Kingdom, establishing a system of tuition fees supported by an income-contingent loan system for students has also been argued to increase equality. In Australia, students also face high tuition fees for higher education, as well as a support system focused on domestic students. In addition to tuition fees, entrance examinations also play a crucial part in higher education systems. In order to examine inequalities in higher education from the students' point of view, tuition fees are scrutinised in connection with equality, and entrance examinations in relation to cultural reproduction. Comparing examples of higher music education institutions in Finland, the United Kingdom, and Australia shows that there are large differences between the tuition fees charged for domestic and international students, as well as between countries. Entrance examinations in higher music education are similar in these countries, but may include inequalities based on long traditions in the field of music, especially in classical music. By revealing misconceptions about equity in higher education, it is possible to have a critical debate about the role of tuition fee systems as they are connected with the economics of higher education, and about entrance examinations as reproducing social class inequalities. This discussion may contribute to the redefinition and reformation of more equitable and just education systems, and promote equality in general in society.

**Keywords:** *tuition fee, entrance examination, equality, cultural reproduction, higher music education*

## Introduction

Equality is not given, nor is it claimed, it is practiced, it is verified.

*(Rancière, 1999, p. 137)*

A national higher education policy which provides equal opportunities to access tertiary education is generally seen as satisfying one of the central criteria for describing an education system as conducive to equality. This article puts the spotlight on the provision of tertiary education in three countries, and assesses to what extent “equal opportunities” is a fitting epithet for this provision. The main emphasis is on higher music education. The countries to be looked at are Finland, the United Kingdom and Australia.<sup>1</sup>

Equality, as a concept, is often associated with Finnish higher education policy because it has been seen to provide equal opportunities to access tertiary education after mandatory primary and secondary education (Leijola, 2004). As Cai and Kivistö (2013) observe, this argument is based on the reality of publicly funded tuition-free higher education system for students in Finland. Low tuition fees have also been seen as a reason why international students choose Finland as a country in which to study in higher education, although feedback from students in the United Kingdom and Australia indicates that university prestige is a more important factor than the cost of tuition fees (Cai & Kivistö, 2013).

The increasing participation rate in university education has brought with it its own issues, such as how to fund growth and still retain the quality of higher education. Elsewhere, the expansion of higher education has been the main argument for introducing tuition fees, for example in the United Kingdom (Ormston & Paterson, 2015). There is research evidence that changing the higher education system in the United Kingdom in 1998 from being publicly funded to being funded by tuition fees supported by an income-contingent loan system for students has promoted equality by increasing funding per student, raising enrolment rates, and increasing the participation of disadvantaged students (Filippakou & Tapper, 2019; Murphy et al., 2019).

In Australia, tuition fees in higher education were abolished in 1974, but were then re-introduced in 1989 (Gale & Parker, 2018). According to Ronai (2015), the Australian government supports domestic students with loans that are not required to be paid back before the students find employment after graduation; however, international students do not have access to these government loans. It has been argued that the high cost of education is a strong motivator for students to complete a degree diligently and on time.

In higher education in Finland, only students outside the European Union and the European Economic Area are required to pay tuition fees for Bachelor and Master level

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programmes (taught in English), although all Bachelor and Master level students pay a small annual student union fee (approximately 100 euros) (Study in Finland, 2020). In Finland, the United Kingdom, and Australia, students can apply for grants, bursaries, and awards to cover tuition fees, and there are also grants or loans available for living expenses, but there are significant differences in these arrangements from country to country, and even within the country in the United Kingdom. Also, the tax systems in different countries influence the expenses and financial support of students in higher education in different ways. In fact, it is not easy for students to obtain this complex and varied information on funding when they are trying to decide where to study (Murphy et al., 2019).

However, there are more barriers to access in higher education than tuition fees; for example, entrance examinations are a crucial part of higher education systems. According to Zimdars et al. (2009), there are nowadays still social class inequalities in access to higher education, especially to elite institutions and fields of study, although women's access rates have increased. When looking at higher music education, where the education is mostly based on one-to-one tuition and small groups, and is thus both costly and lengthy, entrance examinations can eliminate inappropriate admission decisions (Cox, 2010)—but at the same time can eliminate, or at least pare down, very valuable differences and diversity in the student intake as well (Bull, 2019).

Both entrance examinations and tuition fees inexorably pull economics—for example, the financial circumstances of a student's background and that of society at large—into any discussion of higher education. According to Reay (2017), business-minded administration in education, financial requirements, expectations for productivity and efficiency, and increasing unemployment in relation to social class inequalities all have an impact on curricula, and have negative consequences on learning. Biesta (2005) sees the close links between economics and education as a problematic process, where the learners are almost expected to behave like customers and know what they want from teachers and educational institutions, treating them as services. Bull (2019) emphasises that, in order to increase inclusion and diversity in the field of music education, the evidence on inequalities—the role they have and the consequences of this role—needs to be collected and made public.

The aim of this article is to address misconceptions about equity from the students' point of view by examining how equality and cultural reproduction are connected to tuition fees and entrance examinations in higher music education institutions in Finland, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

## **Tuition fees and equality**

When considering the connection between tuition fees and equality in education, the concept of equality needs clarification. From a historical perspective, egalitarianism has become a common and self-evident concept that is taken for granted as an element of

social progression, but its meaning has grown out of a vague and even ambivalent abstract concept, the imprecise nature of which has also influenced the concept of equality in educational contexts (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2012). Very often, equality as a concept is used as if it were interchangeable with equity or justice; however, the meanings are not the same (Nelson et al., 2012). In different educational fields, many discussions around equity have focused on questions of access, participation, and benefits within educational levels and social groups (Lynch & Baker, 2005). Ainscow (2016) takes equity to be concerned with inclusion and fairness in education, and views it as a human right and the basis for justice in society. In addition, equity in connection with quality and efficiency has become the main international measure of the effectiveness of a higher education system (James, 2007).

In Table 1, the differences between three scholars' assumptions about educational equality, educational equity, and educational justice are illustrated to show how overlapping—and even conflicting—these concepts can be.

**Table 1:** Differences in the assumptions of educational equality, equity, and justice.

Authors	Educational equality	Educational equity	Educational justice
Brayboy, Castagno and Maughan (2007)	Equality as sameness of resources and opportunities, but not necessarily meaning justice.	Equity as a system where unequal goods are redistributed to create systems and schools that share a greater likelihood of becoming more equal.	Justice as supporting educational achievement through unequal (although not inequitable) and fairer means, for example, giving to disadvantaged groups and schools more than to others.
Espinoza (2007)	Equality as sameness in treatment, by stipulating the fundamental or natural equality of all individuals.	Equity as associated with fairness or justice when participating in education, through considering individual circumstances.	
Levitan (2016)	Equality as sameness and promoting fairness and justice by giving everyone the same thing.	Equity as fairness and making sure people get access to the same opportunities.	Justice as ensuring that each individual has the opportunities to find and develop their skills and abilities based on their values and their communities' values.

As a summary, *equality* in a society can be considered as a state in which everyone benefits from the same supports through equal treatment; *equity* as a state in which everyone gets the support they need; and *justice* as a state in which any causes of inequity are addressed and removed. Espinoza (2007) argues that the degree of equity is not equivalent with the level of equality, because more equity may result in less equality. Levitan (2016) highlights that in educational contexts equality or equity must not be achieved at the expense of justice.

Brayboy et al. (2007) also argue that equality, in the sense of aspiring towards sameness, is not always compatible with justice, and can lead to assimilationist policies in education. For example, even if educational institutions had equal resources, this would not mean that they were necessarily equitable, fair, and equal. Equity fosters justice and fairness through a non-equal distribution of various national or local or institutional resources,

thereby compensating for inequalities of various sorts in students' backgrounds and other cultural and social circumstances; this results in more equal educational opportunities for students. Therefore, to achieve equality, equity and justice in education, assimilation cannot be a prerequisite for academic success.

Equality, equity, and justice are connected in intertwined ways to students' financial circumstances in higher education. The tuition-free education in Finland can look as if it is promoting equality, as tuition fees are not barriers to study in higher education. However, despite the tuition-free education, there are socio-economic factors connected to higher education in Finland that may cause inequality between individuals. One example is competition in entrance examinations, in which applicants who can afford preparation courses are in a better position and more likely to be accepted than applicants who do not have access to these expensive classes (Leijola, 2004).

The income-contingent loan system in the United Kingdom may be seen as promoting justice, since both advantaged and disadvantaged individuals have the same opportunities to obtain sufficient resources to study in higher education. In reality, however, student loans do not cover all the expenses in a student's life, and this creates a gap between students with and those without familial financial support (Reay, 2017). Moreover, when students have large debts waiting for them when they graduate, universities carry increased pressure to train all their students in all their degree programmes to be more practically employable (Filippakou & Tapper, 2019).

Similarly, the loan system for domestic students in higher education supported by the Australian government may seem to promote equity, because domestic students are more likely to return the government's investment by paying taxes in Australia through their future employment. At the same time, for international students, the high cost of education in Australia can lead to a lowering of quality standards and the unequal treatment of students, if teachers are under pressure to advance the academic interests and graduation of those students who pay higher tuition fees (Ronai, 2015).

## **Entrance examinations and cultural reproduction**

When looking at entrance examinations, Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction offers a view on the impact of cultural capital between social classes with regard to entrance examinations as educational attainment. According to Zimdars et al. (2009, p. 650), "cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society". Thus, cultural capital varies between social classes. Because education systems are built from knowledge and skills based on cultural capital, the system itself reproduces the circumstances that put lower-class students at a disadvantage, since they possess less cultural capital than upper-class students.

In Finland, the connection between entrance examinations and cultural reproduction can be seen as a cumulative source of inequality in higher education stemming from a student's family background, for example parents having university degrees, leading at first to a child's better results in primary and secondary education, which then forms the basis for success in the entrance examinations to higher education (Heiskala et al., 2020; Leijola, 2004). Reay (2017) argues that educational policy changes in the United Kingdom have not been able to overcome the issue that students are educated according to their social class background. Recent research by Czarnecki (2018) shows that in Australia there are still differences in educational opportunity between social classes, which is evident in that young people with upper-class background have better chances than those with lower-class background to access the most prestigious institutions of higher education. Although an awareness of equality in education has been highlighted in educational institutions, emphasis on economic effectiveness has increased competition, which has in turn resulted in decreased social justice and fairness in education, especially for the lower social classes (Reay, 2017).

Higher music education has specific characteristics that differentiate it from other fields in higher education, and which need to be addressed when thinking about entrance examinations in connection to cultural reproduction. In many Western countries, music education practices have historical roots in economic inequalities between social classes, and classical music in particular is characterized by bourgeois practices "created by the aesthetic of classical music's canonic repertoire" (Bull, 2019, p. 222). Therefore, this cultural reproduction can be seen as strengthening the middle class, maintaining gendered patterns, and legitimising hierarchical, competitive, and exclusive educational practices, thus hindering wider participation in music education.

According to Bull's (2019, p. 229) empirical research, these practices are difficult to change because they are reproduced again and again:

... by teachers, who teach as they were taught, by conservative assessment models both in and out of school, by the powerful influence of higher education music institutions, both universities and conservatoires, by parents who want to accrue value of various kinds for their children and by young people themselves who want to find their social niche, and ... often have a strong sense of hierarchies of valued identities.

## **Comparison of tuition fees and entrance examinations in higher music education in Finland, the United Kingdom, and Australia**

Are there notable differences in the tuition fees and entrance examinations between students in higher music education in different countries? To answer this question, three

higher music education institutions in different countries were chosen for this article: the Sibelius Academy (SibA/Uniarts, 2020) in Finland, the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM, 2020) in the United Kingdom, and the Queensland Conservatorium (QCGU, 2020) in Australia.

To obtain a sample overview of what students face with regard to tuition fees in these three countries, Table 2 shows the comparison of degrees, study years, study credits, and tuition fees in euros as of May 2018. Details of degrees and tuition fees were gathered from the institutions' web pages in 2018 (QCGU, 2020; RNCM, 2020; SibA/Uniarts, 2020).

This comparison shows that the Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees in higher music education have some differences in their duration in these institutions in Finland, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In addition, there are striking differences between the tuition fees that students face: there are obvious differences between tuition fees for domestic and international students, and significant differences between the situation in Finland and other countries.

When considering the entrance examination information on the institutions' web pages (QCGU, 2020; RNCM, 2020; SibA/Uniarts, 2020), admission procedures seem to be similar in all institutions. Admission procedures consist of 1) an application which may include recommendations, 2) recorded and/or live auditions (particularly in music performance programmes), 3) an exam, portfolio, or research plan (in other study programmes), and 4) possible interviews, additional tests, or other requirements depending on the study programmes' specific guidelines. However, there is more flexibility in the application dates in the United Kingdom and Australia, where, in addition to exact admission dates, it is possible to apply throughout the year. In Finland, admission dates are very strict.

It is not possible to compare the percentages of applicants and accepted students between the three countries, because information on web pages regarding the total number of applicants and accepted students is only available for Finland. The statistics of the Sibelius Academy (SibA/Uniarts, 2020) show that during the years 2017–2020 at the Bachelor and Master levels the number of applicants has varied between 1197–1500, the number of accepted students has varied between 170–197, and the acceptance percentage has varied between 13–15%. In the United Kingdom, the web pages of the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM, 2020) do provide information about other aspects of the application/acceptance ratio, in particular statistics regarding Transparency Information about the applicants' and accepted students' gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, which is an important way to show the diversity of admissions.

However, Our World in Data statistics for tertiary education can provide an overview of the countries' general situation with regard to education (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2013). Table 3 shows the comparison of the situation in tertiary education between the three countries we have been looking at.

**Table 2:** Comparison of degrees, study years, study credits (ECTS = European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), and tuition fees in three higher music education institutions, in, respectively, Finland, the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, as of May 2018, calculated by using yearly average currency exchange rates (30 May 2019)  
 1 AUD = 0,63 euros and 1 GBP = 1,15 euros

Institution	Lower degree			Higher degree			Doctoral degree		
	Study years and credits (full-time studying)	Tuition fee per year	Study years and credits (full-time studying)	Tuition fee per year	Study years and credits (full-time studying)	Tuition fee per year	Study years and credits (full-time studying)	Tuition fee per year	
		Domestic student	International student	Domestic student	International student	Domestic student	International student	Domestic student	International student
<b>SibA/ Uniarts Finland</b>	Bachelor 3 years 180 ECTS	116 €	116 € + 5 000 € (students outside EU/EEA)	116 €	116 € + 5 000 € (students outside EU/EEA)	0 €	0 €	0 €	0 €
<b>RNCM UK</b>	Bachelor 4 years 400–480 credits (200–240 ECTS)	10 573 €	22 862 €	7 007 € – 30 292 €	22 862 € – 30 292 €	7 007 €	15 718 €	7 007 €	15 718 €
<b>QCGU Australia</b>	Bachelor 3 years 240 credit points (180 ECTS)	4 120 €	18 224 €	13 428 €	19 183 €	0 €	18 863 € – 19 183 €	0 €	18 863 € – 19 183 €
							Doctor 3–4 years 240 credit points (180 ECTS)		



**Table 3:** Aspects of tertiary education in Finland, the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, based on Our World in Data (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2013)

Country	Share of the population older than 14 that has completed tertiary education* in 2010 (%)	Share of those who within 5 years of finishing secondary education** were enrolled in tertiary education* in 2013 (%)	Government expenditure on tertiary education* in 2013 (% of Gross Domestic Product)
Finland	12,35	91,07	2,01
UK	15,31	56,87	1,36
Australia	18,52	86,55	1,37

\*Tertiary education includes short-cycle tertiary education and Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral levels (see UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

\*\*Secondary education includes lower secondary, upper secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary levels (see UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

The statistics regarding the completion of tertiary education show that the percentage was much higher in the United Kingdom and Australia than it was in Finland. On the other hand, when looking at the statistics regarding the number of individuals enrolled in tertiary education, the percentage was higher in Finland and Australia than in the United Kingdom. Government expenditure on tertiary education was higher in Finland than in the United Kingdom and Australia.

## Misconceptions about equity in higher education

The tuition fee systems and entrance examinations in Finland, the United Kingdom, and Australia each aim to increase equality, equity, and justice, but there are still inequalities from the students' point of view. Gale and Parker (2018) point out that the practice of assigning the burden of students' tuition fees to individuals, rather than to the public as a whole, is a product of neoliberalism. Similarly, the neoliberal market economy strengthens the cultural reproduction of social classes so that some sort of causal effect is being strengthened whereby students from wealthier families and/or families with greater resources tend to gain access to wealthier higher education institutions, while students from poorer families with weaker resources tend to access inadequately resourced institutions (Reay, 2017). According to Apple (2006), when neoliberal tendencies have impact on educational systems, it is important to find ways both to contest these tendencies and to strengthen democracy in education.

James (2007) argues that one way to improve equality in education is to reveal misconceptions that surround the discussion of equity in higher education. The first of the six misconceptions identified by James (2007, p. 10) is that "expanding participation will improve equity". As the example of the United Kingdom shows, the increasing participation in higher education was driven by the needs of labour markets, but this later forced a re-establishment of tuition fees and caused a situation in which students are burdened

with heavy debts to be paid after graduation. According to Peltonen (2017), if the process of education is driven purely by economic interests, it may overpower the essential aims of the actual human beings participating in that education.

The second misconception is that “free or low cost higher education will improve equity” (James, 2007, pp. 10–11). As can be seen from the example of Finland’s tuition-free higher education, this also has consequences which may increase inequalities between individuals, such as the use of entrance examinations. Biesta (2005) emphasizes that one of the most important tasks for teachers is to challenge educational systems to activate students as learners to meet otherness and difference. If the entrance examinations eliminate differences among students, then tuition-free education cannot fully support this basic task of education.

The third misconception, connected to the second, is that “improving equity involves the removal of barriers to access” (James, 2007, p. 11). Removing barriers is not the same thing as building opportunities, and therefore removing tuition fees or entrance examinations as barriers to access does not necessarily promote equity if it leads to assimilation policies. Kontio and Sailer (2017) argue that the legitimation of the educational system should include the idea of allowing each individual to cultivate and reach their full potential. Securing sufficient financial aid to manage tuition fees and living costs, for example with money provided by institutional scholarships or government loans, can be a way to enable students to realize their potential in education. Similarly, supporting children in the process of recognizing their potential and providing resources to cultivate their interests from early childhood can prepare them for accessing higher education or pursuing other educational choices.

The fourth misconception is that “the onus is with universities to resolve equity problems” (James, 2007, p. 11). Higher education cannot be solely responsible for increasing equality, equity, and justice in society. A student’s previous educational path, including early childhood before school age, has an impact on their opportunities to achieve their potential through their educational choices. However, financial support for tuition fees by the government and higher education institutions can narrow inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and in that way promote change in the future. This is implemented in Finland through tuition-free education, and in the United Kingdom and Australia through loans and institutional scholarships for students. According to Kontio and Sailer (2017), using taxes for educational investment can be an effective way of achieving a more equal income distribution from the rich to the poor. As Table 3 indicates, Finland invests more public resources in higher education than either the United Kingdom or Australia.

The fifth misconception is that “widening participation will lower standards or lower retention and completion rates” (James, 2007, pp. 11–12). It is too simplistic to argue without strong evidence that increasing participation leads to decreasing retention and completion rates in higher education. There are many factors connected to a student’s circumstances that can slow or hinder graduation. Therefore, these assumptions cannot

be used as arguments against the idea of supporting both advantaged and disadvantaged students on their university paths, for example through governmental support for tuition fees. Education should not be measured only by graduation rates calibrated to serve the economic interests of society. Hansen and Davids (2017) remind us that the heart of education—wisdom—can only be achieved through discourse about important aspects of life, not through educational economics.

This idea is also related to the sixth misconception, that “students can be selected for higher education on academic merit” (James, 2007, p. 12). Gaining admittance to university cannot be a sign of merit or intellectual ability alone, as it is also indicative of cultural reproduction in the cumulative advantages or of disadvantages created by the student’s family, school, and community circumstances. Increasing participation rates and broadening governmental and institutional systems for supporting free tuition or government loans for students have changed the elitist image of higher education over the last decades. According to Dewey (1998/1916), the criteria that determine both the quality and quantity of education should be a combination of the learner’s point of departure and their intrinsic activities and needs.

## Conclusions

How do tuition fees increase or decrease equality? The answer is not simple, as there are different governmental and educational policies connected to the tuition fee systems in different countries. As the examples of tuition fee systems in higher music education institutions provided here show, while they may aim at improving equality, equity, and justice for students, they can, at the same time, also enhance (or even introduce new) inequalities. It would be interesting to consider how tuition fees are connected to students’ well-being, instead of looking merely at students’ economic value as future employees. Recent research by Beban and Trueman (2018) shows that financial worries can be a key source of stress for students in higher education, including the immediate financial needs of paying rent and buying food as well as the anxiety over student loan debt. Future research in relation to equality could concentrate on music students’ experienced workload, stress and struggle to cope as they try to manage their tuition fees and other financial challenges alongside the demands of their higher music education studies (Jääskeläinen, 2016; Jääskeläinen & López-Íñiguez, 2017).

What about entrance examinations and cultural reproduction? Traditions in the field of music have created a strong culture of entrance examinations that is not easy to change, especially because the roots of cultural reproduction are so deeply embedded in music’s aesthetic, pedagogical, and educational systems. In addition, the path from childhood to success (or failure) in a higher education entrance examination is strongly connected to socio-economic and family circumstances. The most important step towards improving entrance

examination systems is to gather data on inequalities and good practices, in order to find ways to strengthen inclusion and diversity. A good example is the Transparency Information displayed on the Royal Northern College of Music web page about the diversity of applicants and accepted students. Bull (2019) suggests rethinking selection processes to increase fairness, as well as developing more diverse curricula and pedagogies in music education, while Reay (2017) emphasizes the impact of collaborative approaches to learning.

Reimer (2007) argues that although inequities and injustices are not going to disappear in music education, it is crucial to pursue broader equality, equity, and justice—and therefore all efforts, even those with modest positive results or resulting in only slight progress, are valuable. This requires a critical debate about the role and impact of tuition fee and entrance examination systems in higher music education, situated within an evaluation of contemporary educational policy trends. According to Bull (2019), crucial topics include 1) social inequalities, 2) genres, class, genders, and race, 3) sexual, emotional, and physical abuse in the field of music, and 4) creative collaboration with other social groups. Moreover, it is vital to listen to young people talk about their joys and concerns, and to integrate their voices into the music institutions' developmental work. Addressing and sharing individual experiences of inequality and oppression in educational systems can make more inclusive education possible (Reay, 2017).

In the field of higher music education, discussion about tuition fees in relation to equality and about entrance examinations in relation to cultural reproduction is crucial. In addition to pursuing this ongoing discussion, Bull (2019, p. 236) provides very practical steps towards verifying equality through funding and access in music education:

The best defence for better public funding for music education is, therefore, not the outdated mantra that every child should have a chance to learn an instrument, but that a public system has more power to sustain and develop more representative, cross-cultural and innovative musical cultures.

It is through such steps in education that we can contribute to the reformation and redefinition of a more equitable and just society in the future (Siljander & Kontio, 2017). This article, looking at these important aspects of higher education mainly from the student's perspective, seeks to make a contribution to promoting equality both in higher music education and in society in general.

## **Author biography**

**Tuula Jääskeläinen** (M.Ed.) has twenty years of working experience in the higher education administration of the University of Helsinki and the University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland, as a project coordinator, planning officer, university pedagogy lecturer, and head

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