

# How do we learn music? Collecting feedback from Kastamonu University music students

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## ABSTRACT

The study studied how students studying music at Kastamonu University learn about music and whether they receive additional help in 2020. The first study detailed in this article focused on identifying student perceptions and how they learned music, and aimed to come up with suggestions on how to better meet the needs of music students. To do this, we conducted two focus group interviews with music graduate (N = 6) and undergraduate (N = 4) students. Participants said that the timing of the study should better reflect their work and that the studies should be more disciplinary and better designed for graduate students. They also felt that they did not get enough critical feedback and there was a lack of standardization in the training and concert work. However, the participants also felt that the teachers were helpful, the programming contributed well to their work and the support increased their confidence. Two unexpected findings were that students generally access some form of programming offered by the school rather than take advantage of the diverse offerings, and students have misconceptions about the possibilities the school offers and how to use them. It is hoped that this study will help inform other student academic support services about focus group research for the purpose of collecting music program evaluation and student feedback.

**Keywords:** Music, music education, music student, feedback, learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 2016, Kastamonu University has been providing academic music reading support to all undergraduate students through the School of Music. In 2020, students who completed the four-year undergraduate program became the first graduates of the school. In 2016-2020, Kastamonu University Music School provided employment for dozens of students.

Over the past decade, there have been many areas of focus related to music school's research. One of the areas studied is students' perceptions and expectations of academic communication support and the implications of these perceptions for music schools. For example, Moussu (2013) points out that with regard to writing, music students are often caught up in opposing educational frameworks: students perceive music support as a kind of "music market support" (p. 56), while music

teachers are interested in academia. Music schools are developing strategies that will respond to expectations while preserving their educational framework (Moussu, 2013).

In addition, the research focused on the role of assessing the academic communication needs of music students for curriculum design (Huang, 2013). Huang (2013) stated that questioning about student needs is a necessary action in program development, task design and material development processes. In fact, inquiry is a fundamental step towards reaching an empirically validated approach that will most effectively support students' skill development. Based on evidence-based, reflective programming, in the context of our own dynamic student population, we made a reflection on the importance of both students' expectations of music

support and their perception of academic learning needs (Simpson and Waye, 2016).

While evaluating our options for this first research project, we selected students who studied music at Kastamonu University and graduated from music school. We felt that this data collection technique valued students 'music because focus group methodology is an "ideal" approach to exploring individuals' needs, concerns, experiences and perspectives (Kitzinger, 2005: 57); it also serves as a tool for program evaluation (Williams and Katz, 2010). In addition, focus group methodology has the ability to use collaboration between participants to gather detailed answers to specific questions (Cushman et al., 2005) and therefore can achieve a higher level of ecological validity not found in survey research or other research methods (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). For these reasons, focus groups are considered to be an effective and reliable method for collecting the data needed to inform our future program design (Simpson and Waye, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

Two groups of students who study music and graduates at Kastamonu University were designed. Students interested in music were asked to contact a staff member who was not connected to music. After recruitment, focus groups were facilitated by two moderators. In focus groups, a moderator asked questions and interacted with participants sitting at a round table, while the other moderator took detailed notes from the corner of the room. Notes were captured on a laptop throughout the entire focus group discussion to record participants' comments. Participants; ten students participated in the study. Participants' backgrounds were varied, with 60% graduating from the music department and 40% enrolling as undergraduate music students. The majority of the participants (90%) were women. A graduate student with a professional musical education joined the focus group. Table 1 summarizes the participant characteristics. Ten

students expressed interest in the student recruitment posters.

## Participants' backgrounds

Ten main questions were used in the study and the questions were divided into four categories:

1. Questions about music students' perceptions of the usefulness of programming: For example, what did you find useful and what did you find useless, considering the school program you used?
2. Questions about students' current readiness: For example, which high school program did you not attend and why?
3. Questions about students' perceived needs: For example, what is good music for you?
4. Questions aiming to reveal suggestions: For example, what do you think is the best way to get students information about the programs that music offers?

## Data analysis

The data were analyzed following the classic data analysis strategy outlined in Krueger and Casey (2009), which consists of a systematic strategy that includes the organization and categorization of transcripts and coding of participants' expressions for relevance, frequency, specificity, and emotion. Using this approach, data were analyzed and independently coded. Each member followed the same method of identifying key points, summarizing, and extracting support from transcripts in the form of quotations. Then, individual analyzes were discussed and compared in a face-to-face meeting held approximately one week after the data collection period. Inconsistencies in coding were discussed until they were resolved and a final analysis was reached. The following sections detail the main findings of both focus groups.

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics (N = 10).

Gender	Female	(9)	90%
	Male	(1)	10%
Level of study	Undergraduate	(4)	40%
	Graduate	(6)	60%
Year of study	1	(6)	30% (undergraduate); 30% (graduate)
	2	(6)	10% (undergraduate); 20% (graduate)
	3	(3)	0% (undergraduate); 10% (graduate)
Language	Masters	(1)	10%
	License	(9)	90%

**RESULTS**

**Perceives positively**

The first category of questions focused on how students perceive and access the services currently offered by Kastamonu University Music School. The services students can reflect on include:

1. Concert works for graduate students with a stream titled "Specialized Class".
2. One-on-one appointments including 25-minute reserved individual rooms, 15-minute drop-outs and asynchronous online feedback.
3. Chat Cafe, an opportunity for students to talk music in a friendly atmosphere.
4. Online music education and usable applications.

In terms of perception, participants in both focus groups responded similarly: they noted that music schools "helped" them learn music.

Table 2 List student comments on the usefulness of music education programming in understanding music.

In addition to being helpful, many students also stated that they experienced a positive emotional state such as feeling comfortable: "I came here to learn about music. I never felt nervous. "Another student" I feel very good. My classmates are coming too, so it's even better. "In addition, five main sub-themes were identified in terms of student perceptions of the strengths of music education programming.

**Developing academic communication skills**

The main task of music education is to help students learn how to improve their academic communication skills. The data collected reflects this order: "You are actually learning something. High school teachers only tell you one thing. They know where the problem lies here. They tell you to think. And then [they] help you review your post.

**Table 2.** Musical education programs.

Online education	Face to face education	Workshops
It is the education system of the future that has become very fashionable in the recent years, especially after the pandemic.	Face-to-face training is the best method of performance lessons, especially music.	Graduates see the benefits of their education, especially after education period ends. In the feedback, they talk about how useful school programs are.

**Performance improvement**

An improvement in student performance is part of the mission of Music schools. Students who study music are seeing an increase in their assignment scores as evidence of their increased mastery of academic communication skills. Graduating students stated that their musical performance increased thanks to their education (Simpson and Wayne, 2016).

**Building trust**

In addition to teaching students how to improve their academic communication skills, the music program is designed to help students feel more confident about their learning abilities. As one student said, My first music teacher encouraged me to sing. Thanks to this, I decided to study music professionally at the university. Socializing is very important to increase the music student's confidence. Cafeterias are the most important places where students will make music and share with each other. Student concerts and concerts are examples of this.

**Perceptions of uselessness**

In addition to commenting on the music programming that the participants thought was helpful, the participants also commented on areas that they felt were less helpful. Interestingly, as opposed to discussing philanthropy, rather than describing specific programs, participants discussed aspects of programming that they perceived as useless. These comments mainly focused on four main aspects of the program: (1) timing, (2) lack of standardization in trainings, (3) very simple study class (4) lack of feedback.

1) Timing and flexibility: The students' comments showed a different understanding of how one-on-one tutorials can and should be used. For example, the students said:

- "[Tutorials] are a little short. During a lesson I often cannot finish a track and I have to rework."
- "Too many studies and no time"
- I cannot use the piano rooms. This is because there is limited number of pianos.

Although we designed tutorials to focus on one or two

areas of support, students believed that the tutor was to continue their assignments from start to finish. Also, the point of view on music is that an educator is strategically oriented to support students, not exactly, and the comments of the participants show a different perspective.

2) Lack of standardization: One of the issues that participants discussed when working with different teachers is the lack of teacher-to-teacher standardization. The large staff meant that musical education could offer teachers representing various disciplines and skill sets, while students commented on the lack of consistency among teachers. Participants expressed that they liked the lessons, but they were sometimes "confused about different teaching methods" because "the instructors have different approaches, sometimes they are contradictory. So, it gets confusing.

3. They mentioned that the working classes are very small in terms of volume and it is not suitable for students to have a comfortable time. They also mentioned that their small number of students could not find the opportunity to work at the time they wanted. Another problem was that working rooms were closed on weekends and holidays, except for certain hours.

4. Not enough constructive feedback: Like the content of the music program, the feedback given in the trainings and studies did not satisfy the participants. One participant felt "he couldn't make improvements [s] at Café: no feedback, no summaries, and no advice." Another stated that "online lessons are not very useful because the feedback is so general. Like the purpose of the tutorials, the approach of music education to feedback is different from what students want or at least not clearly communicated.

Overall, participants in both focus groups discussed music education and programming in a positive way, stating that their experiences were positive and that music programming was beneficial for their learning. Regarding improvements, timing, feedback, and the lack of standardization between training sessions were most frequently discussed in both focus groups.

### Music education program competencies

#### Information

##### Theoretical, Phenomenal

- To gain knowledge of Traditional Turkish Folk Music theory and repertoire.
- To gain knowledge of Traditional Turkish Art Music theory and repertoire
- Gaining experience on Western Classical Music Harmony, hearing training.

- To have knowledge on general music history and Turkish music history.

#### Skills

##### Cognitive, Applied

- Music teacher, academician, artist-trainer in public and private art institutions
- To gain knowledge of Traditional Turkish Folk Music theory and repertoire.
- Gaining experience on Western Classical Music Harmony, hearing training.
- To be able to play the works of Turkish and Western composers on the piano
- Playing and singing folk music with Baglama
- Playing block flute and guitar from school instruments and singing along to children's songs
- Gaining performance-based experience with orchestra and choir lessons

#### Competences

##### Competence to Work Independently and to Take Responsibility

- Music teacher, academician, artist-trainer in public and private art institutions
- To gain knowledge of Traditional Turkish Folk Music theory and repertoire.

#### Learning Competence

##### Communication and Social Competence

- Gaining teaching experience with the opportunity to do an internship in national education.

#### Field-Specific Competence

- Music teacher, academician, artist-trainer in public and private art institutions
- To gain knowledge of Traditional Turkish Folk Music theory and repertoire.
- To gain knowledge of Traditional Turkish Art Music theory and repertoire
- To be able to play the works of Turkish and Western composers on the piano
- Playing and singing folk music with Baglama
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### Perceived needs

In addition to exploring their perceptions of music education programming and program usage, participants were also asked to discuss their perceived needs in the context of academic communication support. Three main themes were identified in terms of perceived needs: (1) discipline-specific support, (2) graduate-specific help, and (3) "other" support.

**Discipline-specific support:** Similar to the findings of Huang (2011), our study showed that a number of students identified needing more discipline-specific support. Students claimed that they “need someone who knows stuff from their field.

**Graduate-specific help:** In addition, the graduate students who participated in the focus groups expressed a need for increased support, specifically with respect to (1) thesis writing, (2) oral defence and presentation support, and (3) goal setting.

**Support for writing thesis:** There was an overwhelming consensus among graduate students about the need for thesis writing support. Participants stated that they were “confused” in the writing process “in general” and “[wished] more help with writing the thesis.” Participants identified proposal and methodology writing as their special interest and expressed their appreciation for their academic work that offers “the big picture of how to deal with a general topic such as thesis writing” as well as musical studies that address these issues.

**Oral defence and presentation support:** Similarly, there was agreement among many of the graduate student participants regarding a need for “help with oral defence and presentation.” Although they discussed it less than thesis-writing support, participants indicated that if they were aware of an oral defence workshop, they would “come for that. Goal-setting support; Lastly, an interesting discussion arose after one participant expressed a need for goal setting and accountability support. The participant mentioned that she would like to have someone who knows her goals and plans and would remind her of them to keep her accountable. In essence, this participant indicated that she wanted this service to be a replacement for her supervisor, who she felt did not follow up on her work (Simpson and Waye, 2016).

### **Other support**

In addition to the perceived needs discussed above, the participants also talked about other areas they felt they needed support, or specific topics that they wanted music education to cover. These issues are described in Table 3. While some of these recommendations are being addressed by other campus support units, they may consider targeting musical education programming to meet these perceived needs.

## **PARTICIPANT SUGGESTIONS**

When asked for suggestions on how to improve musical education, the participants presented a variety of ideas,

mostly focusing on the timing, presentation, structure and content of school-student communication and individual work.

### **Music education school-student communication**

#### ***Instructor profiles and concert studies***

There was general consensus among the participants regarding the appreciation of the information available online regarding the trainers' backgrounds and skills. Participants suggested that such information informs their decisions about which programs to attend and can help them develop a relationship with teachers. In one of the focus groups, participants suggested that an online link linking music studies and instructor profiles would allow students to know “who is doing what”. In terms of one-to-one tutors, the participants agreed that the success of the training depends on chemistry between teachers and students. They argued that “it is difficult to get to know teachers” and that having as much information as possible can help them get to know academics before participating in their educational and musical studies.

#### ***Advertisement***

Many participants acknowledged the lack of awareness of the programming offered by music schools. Participants decided that better advertising would help them gain awareness of the types of programs offered. Participants made many suggestions on which advertising methods would be most effective for them. These suggestions included others, some of which we are currently involved and not considered.

- 1) Electronic communications such as department emails, music school website and emails, including social media.
- 2) Visual displays such as posters around professors' offices, reminders of upcoming proposals on classroom whiteboards, and flyers on specific services.
- 3) More targeted advertising, such as an explanation of why a concert venue topic should be important to them and the schedule of daily offers.

#### ***Delivery of content***

Finally, when asked for suggestions on how to make their music studies more effective, students cited three main categories: (1) research, (2) structure, and (3) content summarized in Table 4.

Again, these results were surprising for us because we thought the music studies were well designed, provided opportunities to apply new learning, used examples, and

**Table 3.** Perceived areas of need.

Speaking	Work	Professional skills
"Academic speaking"	"Self-study room"	"Interview"
"Casual speaking"	"Concert and concert event"	"Career and professional related skills"
"Concert Hall"		

**Table 4.** Suggestions for increasing effectiveness of workshops.

Research	Structure	Content
Music is an endless sea. For this reason, people who are engaged in music should constantly research and improve themselves.	Music contains a discipline that cannot be taken lightly. Therefore, plenty of exercise is the basis of learning music.	The most basic element of understanding music is the program. For this reason, a specific and planned program should be followed.

used papers. However, the data show that these design aspects are not included in all music studies or that the students cannot remember these components. So, two activities are required to implement these findings: when workshops are developed, what these aspects of students are included in the music studies they seek and ensure that all music education actually has these characteristics every time it is presented (Simpson and Wayne, 2016).

## LIMITATIONS

Although focus group interviews have been widely used due to their ability to provide insights into "what people think" (Kitzinger, 1995: 299), this method has also been subject to a number of criticisms. For example, Krueger and Casey (2009) note that focus group data can be subject to dominant individuals within the focus groups and that there is a tendency for participants to make up answers where limited experience is perceived. While the first criticism may have been slightly applicable to our data collection, the second was definitely applicable: it was clear that instead of collecting information on what students thought about our programming, we collected information on what students thought they knew about our programming. Good examples of this are students stating that tutorials are limited to 25 min, rather than 50 min, and that programming is held only during daytime hours.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study represent the opinions of a limited sample and may not extend to those of the entire student population. A wider range of participants would have been helpful, too, to determine if similar findings would be repeated, if further issues would arise, and if the recommendations would be the same.

Further, when identifying or reflecting on practical suggestions based on these data, it is critical to remain

cognizant of what the music education can practically do in terms of resource and staff availability and in terms of the scope and mandate of the centre.

Moreover, the findings of this study may be of limited interest to a broader community, but they hope this study will help inform other student academic support services about how to engage in focus group research for the purposes of program evaluation and collecting student feedback.

## SUGGESTIONS

Three themes arose from our data analysis: time, advertising, and specialization. In the simplest form, students were not fully aware of when services were offered and how to use them to their best advantage (an advertising issue), students felt that services should be scheduled in accordance with when they are not in class (a timing issue), and students felt the offerings should be less general and more suited to both the needs of their student population (e.g., graduate students) and their areas of study (a specialization issue).

### Time: Understanding student perceptions of time and timing

In line with Huang's (2011) findings, the participants' comments showed that timing is one of the biggest problems in terms of both one-to-one tutoring sessions and music studies. According to the comments of the participants, it was found that the education of music students was not long enough. In addition, a clearer communication of the educational philosophy of music schools can also address perceptions of programming length. In addition to lesson planning in music schools, plans should be made for individual studies. It should be evaluated on weekends for collective music works.

### Advertising: Helping students know about all the programming options

Echoing the findings of Huang (2011), music may consider creating more tools to raise students' awareness of programming offered by music schools. It is now clear that programming knowledge is not reaching students, even those who regularly use some music services, although most of the advertisements of the participants are the strategies already implemented by the music market. For example, many students have one-on-one tuition as their first entry point to music. Therefore, training teachers to review other music programs consistently with students can be an effective way to increase students' awareness of programming. Also, music should evaluate alternative advertising methods to help students understand the range of programming available, its schedule, and how best to use it. Different advertising methods can also be considered. Social media and music websites are probably two underutilized advertising methods. Specifically, the website and program can have a closer connection by linking specific teachers to the music work they provide, allowing students to feel connected to the teacher in advance and to choose music studies based on the positive interactions they have had with teachers in the past.

### Specializing: Considering discipline-specific programming

Given the limited resources available, many administrators agree that hosting programs that apply to the majority of students is a more effective use of a music school's resources rather than programs that focus on specific disciplines. Also, music schools, like others, recognize the fine line between the support they provide for their graduate students and the support that supervisors provide or should give. However, according to the findings of this study, there is a clear desire for discipline. It may be worth considering the specific support and, in the future, the feasibility of designing and implementing academic communication support programs for specific disciplines. Also, based on our findings, music schools will offer a pilot program that offers on-demand workshops in departments to provide more specialized, contextual student academic support, and a second pilot program to support presentation skills development at postgraduate level; Future research on these pilots will be required. Other recommendations found in the data include:

- Standardization of services: Through teacher training, hands-on management and regular program evaluation, tutorials and workshops can achieve greater standardization.
- Considering feedback: Although providing feedback is

part of the design of our programs, we may want to consider providing more feedback more clearly.

- Considering educational limits: A few years ago, there was no limit on the number of one-to-one lessons a student could have. However, with a significant increase in the number of students at the university, especially music students, a student limit per semester was introduced.

### CONCLUSION

Despite the disadvantages, the use of focus groups to support our quantitative data collected through usage statistics and anonymous surveys provided important information about the perspectives of our music students studying at Kastamonu University, perceived academic communication support needs and the use of our Center's programs. These perspectives and other findings allow music education to take a more evidence-based approach to making programmatic and administrative decisions. In addition, the results of this study can serve as parameters when implementing program changes and can also help verify and empirically validate the programming of music education. In turn, this evidence-based programming practice may perhaps help preserve future resources (Procter, 2011). As we look at the horizon and see the increase in government interest in learning outcomes, program evaluation, which includes both qualitative and quantitative feedback, seems poised to play a more central role in the development and maintenance of musical education support programming. The study sets an example for field experts and similar studies.

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