

Perceptions of Student Employability of Music Major Students

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Abstract: This study explores the perceptions of employability among undergraduate music major students, focusing on how they interpret their readiness for the workforce in the context of their academic experiences. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 students enrolled in music programs. Thematic analysis revealed five central themes: lack of practical experience, importance of soft skills, need for career guidance, curriculum misalignment with job market expectations, and the role of self-efficacy in employment preparation. Findings indicate that while students value their musical training, they perceive significant gaps in the curriculum's ability to equip them with career-relevant skills and real-world exposure. Students also emphasized the critical importance of personal confidence and interpersonal competencies in shaping their employability. The results highlight the need for higher music education institutions to adopt more holistic and practice-oriented approaches that integrate career development, experiential learning, and professional identity formation into their curricula.

Keywords: Student Employability, Challenges and Opportunities, Music Major, Career Guidance.

1. Introduction

In today's competitive labor market, combined with the escalating cost of higher education, perceived employability, students' belief in their capacity to secure and retain employment, has become a pivotal concern for both educators and students. Research demonstrates that perceptions of employability are shaped by personal traits such as self-efficacy, ambition, and broad transferable skills, through educational experiences like internships, extracurricular involvement, and effective teaching, and by macro-level conditions such as the state of the labor market (Ergün & Şeşen, 2021[1]; Donald et al., 2018 [2]; Caballero et al., 2021[3]). While individual attributes contribute to confidence, external factors such as economic conditions often exert a stronger influence on how employable students feel (Ergün & Şeşen, 2021[1]). Furthermore, students who actively engage in internships and extracurricular activities report higher levels of perceived employability, yet many misunderstand what employers prioritize, placing excessive value on academic grades while underestimating the importance of communication and teamwork skills (Donald et al., 2018 [2]). A heightened sense of employability has also been linked to increased academic engagement and reduced stress levels (Donald et al., 2018 [2]).

When focusing on music education, these general trends manifest in unique ways. Students pursuing music degrees frequently express the belief that institutions should prepare them to be accomplished musicians and adaptable professionals capable of thriving in diverse careers (Wang & Wang, 2024 [4]; Munnelly, 2020 [5]). However, many reports insufficient opportunities for authentic, real-world learning and career preparation embedded within their curricula (Munnelly, 2020 [5]; Wang & Wang, 2024 [4]). Levels of major satisfaction, driven by interpersonal connections and perceived value, have been found to significantly impact students' motivation and their preparedness for employment, with self-efficacy serving as a potent mediating influence

(Cho & Cho, 2024 [6]; Shaw, 2022 [7]). Innovative, student-led initiatives such as artistic projects have been shown to create authentic pathways to employment for music education majors, particularly those entering the teaching profession (Jenkins & Crawford, 2022 [8]). Similarly, engagement in structured project-based research has emerged as an effective strategy to close the gap between formal academic training and workplace readiness (Li & Han, 2024 [9]).

A growing body of scholarship advocates for an ecosystem-oriented approach to employability development in music higher education. This holistic perspective encourages students to cultivate professional identities, develop valuable networks, and critically reflect on their evolving definitions of success amid a changing industry (Bennett, 2016 [10]; López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2021 [11]). Despite widespread support for this model, there remain notable deficiencies in formal curricular structures that support such comprehensive development, signaling a need for more integrated and practice-oriented approaches (Wang & Wang, 2024 [4]; Jenkins & Crawford, 2022 [8]).

This study explores how music major students perceive their own employability, identifying the internal influences such as confidence and skill sets, alongside external influences such as curriculum design and market readiness that shape these perceptions. Drawing upon foundational research, this research employs a mixed-methods design that encompasses both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The overarching aim is to develop actionable, evidence-based recommendations for higher music education policies and curricula.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to study the perceptions of student employability among 15 music major students. A qualitative approach is particularly suited to exploring how individuals construct meaning around complex, subjective experiences such as career readiness and

employability. The primary method of data collection in this study is semi-structured interviews. It enables a flexible yet focused dialogue, allowing participants to elaborate on themes such as their career expectations, skill development, curricular experiences, and perceptions of readiness for employment. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on undergraduate students enrolled in music-related programs.

The data treatment process began with familiarization with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes, identification of themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally producing the report. Themes were derived inductively from the data, though they were also interpreted considering existing theoretical and empirical studies on student employability.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the key themes that emerged from qualitative interviews conducted with 15 undergraduate music major students regarding their perceptions of employability. The thematic analysis revealed five dominant areas of concern and reflection: lack of practical experience, importance of soft skills, need for career guidance, curriculum misalignment with job market demands, and the role of self-efficacy in employment preparation.

Table 1. Results on the Perceptions of Student Employability of Music Major Students

Theme	Frequency	Sample Responses
Lack of practical experience	4	S2: "I wish we had more internships or live performances included in our program."
Importance of soft skills	3	S4: "Employers often care more about communication and collaboration than our grades."
Need for career guidance	3	S7: "I'm not sure what career paths are available besides performance or teaching."
Curriculum misalignment with job market	2	S13: "There's a gap between what we're taught and what employers actually look for."
High self-efficacy leads to better preparation	3	S15: "Confidence helped me apply for internships even without much formal guidance."

The results of the thematic analysis, derived from interviews with 15 undergraduate music major students, reveal five core themes that shape students' perceptions of their employability. These themes include the lack of practical experience, the perceived importance of soft skills, the need for career guidance, the misalignment between curriculum and job market expectations, and the impact of self-efficacy on employment preparation. Each theme illustrates specific challenges students face in transitioning from academic study to professional life, and together they offer a comprehensive view of how music majors assess their career readiness.

The most frequently cited concern was the lack of practical experience, identified by four participants. Many students expressed dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities

provided within their programs to engage in real-world activities such as internships, public performances, or collaborative projects. One student remarked, "I wish we had more internships or live performances included in our program," capturing a sentiment shared by others who feel underprepared for employment contexts beyond the classroom. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that music curricula often prioritize theoretical knowledge and technical proficiency over experiential learning, leaving students uncertain about how to apply their skills in professional settings (Wang & Wang, 2024; Munnely, 2020).

The importance of soft skills was highlighted by three participants. Students acknowledged that employers increasingly value interpersonal competencies such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability. One interviewee commented that "employers often care more about communication and collaboration than our grades," pointing to a perceived mismatch between what is emphasized in academic assessments and what is expected in the workplace. This observation reflects broader concerns in employability literature, where soft skills are frequently identified as critical yet underdeveloped in higher education programs (Donald et al., 2018; Jenkins & Crawford, 2022).

Another theme mentioned by three students was the need for career guidance. Participants expressed uncertainty about their future career paths and noted a lack of structured support from their institutions. As one student stated, "I'm not sure what career paths are available besides performance or teaching." This suggests that career counseling services, when available, may not be adequately tailored to the diverse and evolving nature of music-related professions. The absence of such guidance contributes to anxiety and confusion among students preparing to enter a competitive labor market (Cho & Cho, 2024; López-Íñiguez & Bennett, 2021).

Two students drew attention to the misalignment between the music curriculum and job market realities. They described the curriculum as outdated and disconnected from current industry practices. One student observed, "There's a gap between what we're taught and what employers actually look for," highlighting the need for curricular reform that better integrates career-relevant content, such as digital tools, entrepreneurial strategies, and industry trends. This concern echoes existing critiques in the literature that call for a reevaluation of music education frameworks to ensure they remain responsive to labor market demands (Bennett, 2016; Li & Han, 2024).

Lastly, three participants emphasized the role of self-efficacy in employment preparation. These students described how their confidence in their own abilities enabled them to seek out career development opportunities even when institutional support was limited. One participant explained, "Confidence helped me apply for internships even without much formal guidance," illustrating the powerful influence of personal agency in navigating the transition from education to work. This supports prior findings that self-efficacy acts as a key mediator between educational satisfaction and employability outcomes (Cho & Cho, 2024; Shaw, 2022).

In summary, the themes identified in this study point to both individual and structural factors that influence how music major students perceive their employability. While students show a clear awareness of the competencies needed for career success, they also experience significant gaps in the

support and resources provided by their institutions. Addressing these concerns through curricular reform, enhanced career services, and initiatives that build both technical and soft skills may strengthen the employability prospects of music graduates in an increasingly complex and dynamic job market.

4. Conclusion

Students expressed concern that their programs focus too heavily on theory, offering limited real-world exposure and support for career planning. While they recognized the value of soft skills and personal confidence in enhancing employability, many felt that institutional structures did not adequately prepare them for diverse professional pathways. The findings suggest a pressing need for more integrated, experiential, and student-centered approaches in music higher education to better align with evolving labor market demands.

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