

**Submission  
No 21**

**INQUIRY INTO ARTS AND MUSIC EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Name:** Dr James Humberstone

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

**Dr James Humberstone FRSA**  
Senior Lecturer, Music Education Division

Thursday, 25 July 2024

Dear Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales,

It is my pleasure to make a submission to this inquiry. In it, I will focus on the areas of the terms of reference that are closest to my academic expertise (as a Senior Lecturer in Music Education at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney for the past 12 years), my musical expertise (I'm a regularly performed composer and producer, internationally), my teaching expertise (12 years in the K-12 NSW classroom), and my technology expertise in the private sector (just under a decade as Director of Education and Innovation at Sibelius Australia, a Division of Avid).

I want to stick as closely as possible to my research and personal experience because I know that you will have a lot of submissions, and you don't need a tome from me addressing every single point of the enquiry. I have read and offered feedback on the ASME (Australian Society for Music Education) submission, and broadly support every idea in the draft I read, even if I might have phrased or conceptualised some of those ideas differently.

I would also like to state, before I begin, that I am the father of three young people, two of whom are still studying in NSW public schools. My daughter is in year 11, and studying Music 1 toward the HSC next year. She's also a very dedicated singer in Sydney Children's Choir and Gondwana Voices and has performed with Opera Australia, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and many other professional companies. My son is in year 9, also electing to study music, and also singing with Sydney Children's Choir and Gondwana Voices. He is also a talented cellist, playing for the Northern Beaches Youth Orchestra, and just spent a week at the NSW State Music Camp. I am also husband to the incredible Anna Humberstone, founding artistic director of Hummingsong Women's Choirs, who have worked with over 4,000 NSW women over the last decade, educating them in singing, putting on concerts, and working together with our targeted charities, women and children's shelters, raising over \$375,000 for survivors of domestic violence. I am the other (and much less important) director of Hummingsong, and terribly proud of the communities of women doing work *for* women that Anna has created.

Sydney Conservatorium of Music  
Music Education Division  
Rm 2126, Building C41  
Sydney  
NSW 2000 Australia

ABN 15 211 513 464  
CRICOS 00026A



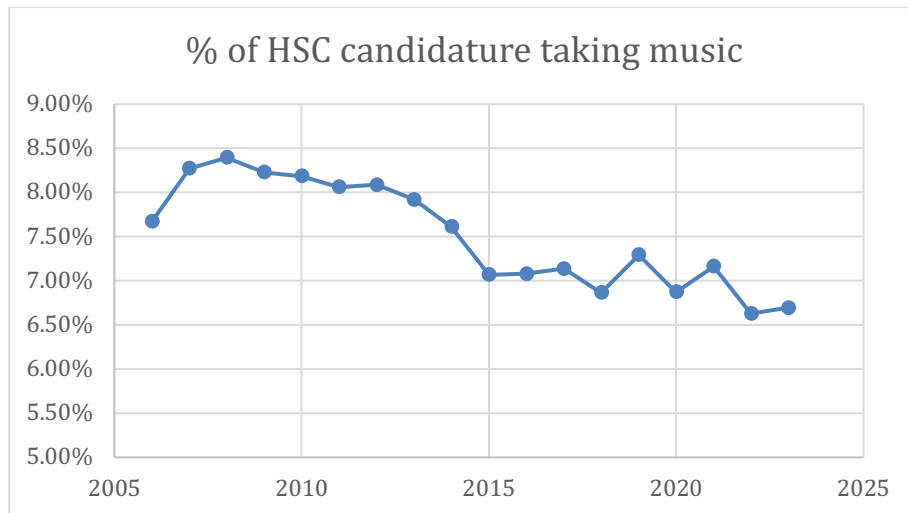
It's lovely to boast about how incredible your musical family are, but the real reason I tell you this is because I want you to see that my family and I live and breathe the NSW musical life, in community, in schools and youth ensembles, as well as academically and professionally, I can assure you that nothing is more important to me, personally or professionally.

I would be very happy to explain any of the following ideas, or comment on the terms of reference that I'm skipping in this submission, at any time, formally to the Joint Select Committee, or informally (after all, my office at "The Con" isn't too far away from you at parliament). I was invited to give evidence at your first hearing, but I will be in Helsinki at the biannual conference of the International Society for Music Education. One of the papers that I'm giving at a pre-conference commission is on the music curriculum wars in NSW! Which is a great place to start...

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The main point I want to make in my submission is that NSW is generally in a good position in regards to music education historically, but that we have allowed that good position to slide over the last 20 years by **(a) not providing a formal process for specialist music teachers to be trained, accredited and employed in our public primary schools, (b) not reviewing our music syllabi regularly or systematically to remain at the forefront of curriculum internationally, and (c) in the last decade, having allowed the curriculum reform/renewal process to become secretive and controlled by non-music education experts with non-music education priorities** and understanding of music education that is mediocre at best.

As a result, in NSW we have a music curriculum which is generally OK, but not close world-leading. Our primary syllabus is mostly only taught properly in independent and catholic systemic schools. Our secondary syllabus Stages 4 and 5 was recently renewed, and while it was a small step forward, it was a huge missed opportunity to become a world leader as we were when the 2003 syllabus (the prior syllabus) was published. This process was secretive and highly political, which is what resulted in a weak syllabus. As far as I can tell (from its many internal contradictions), there was no expert in Evidence-Based Practice in Music Education (i.e. a current NSW researcher) involved in its development. The Stage 6 syllabi (including HSC courses Music 1, Music 2, and Music Extension) are currently being reviewed and NESA's process again is secretive. I imagine that we will have a similar outcome: a syllabus which is a little bit better, that contains internal contradictions, and is a missed opportunity to really be world-leading. Also possibly a missed opportunity to stop the slow decline of enrolments in Music.



Source: All prior years are from [https://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/ebos/static/ebos\\_stats.html](https://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/ebos/static/ebos_stats.html) where total candidature has its own page for each year, and course entries can be found under "Student Entries by Sex" for each year. Recent years from <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/hsc/about-HSC/HSC-facts-figures/overview-HSC-students>

If you would like to read more of my criticisms of the recently released Stage 4 and 5 Music Syllabus:

- I wrote the response for the Australian Association for Research in Education: <https://blog.aare.edu.au/the-brand-new-syllabus-should-let-the-music-play/>
- I dedicated two episodes of my podcast, *Music Zettel* to it;
  - One on the positive: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4xr882c34FRygbpkhzzZdd?si=ecd5ce92af0b4c73>
  - One on the negative: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5tkz3vOjljwqQ0DfMJQRkY?si=b6ac481343b5463c>

As I say in each of those publications, NESAs claimed that this is an Evidence-Based Syllabus, but as someone who reads and even creates the evidence, I can assure you it isn't. It's not close. Tomorrow I'll be at the Music In Schools and Teacher Education Commission pre-conference in Tallinn Estonia, and on the plane on the way there I've been reading a dozen papers that will be given. The focus in those papers is on cultural diversity and responsiveness, globalism and internationalism, and de-centring the terribly classical Eurocentric tradition that still pervades in many countries (including ours). The



most successful countries are developing and delivering authentic and industry-ready diverse musical skills that are not tied down by notions of historicity, style, and value.

Sadly, this is exactly where the 2003 syllabus matched the best on the world stage. But we really needed a lot of work to catch up on 20 years of stagnation, and the new syllabus *did* need to be Evidence-Based, and informed by the best practice internationally. And it isn't. The worst part of it is that it has added 56 content points to be marked off for every student by the music teacher – just the kind of busy work that got us into the current teacher shortage crisis. It's mind numbing that NESA could think that's a good idea, especially in a subject where (as you'll know if you've ever learned a musical instrument), knowledge is embodied, not explicit.

The state of what we consider Evidence-Based Practice in education in Australia is weak. In the leading countries in this field, independent bodies (usually in universities, although the UK also has some independent research groups) provide reports for government. In Australia, we have AERO federally, and CESE in NSW, both embedded in government departments. CESE do not publish methodologies for their literature reviews, and there's a reason for that – it's because the work they do is often cherry-picked from the literature to meet department or the minister's ideology. This is, obviously, the *opposite* of evidence-based.

It should also be noted, however, that unlike fields like medicine, Evidence-Based Practice in education has been a contested field for the past 25 years. But again, here we have an opportunity to lead, and my colleague Dr Brad Fuller and I have recently launched a symposium for *Educative Evidence-Based Practice for Music Education* which will be hosted by the University of Sydney, but call on researchers and practitioners (teachers) internationally. We hope that this symposium will lead to the first book in our field, and generate many ideas for music teachers to innovate in their music classrooms.

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/music/our-research/music-education/educative-evidence-based-practice-in-music-education.html>

Although I am very critical of the work done by NESA over the last decade, and the fact that it has left us stagnating in NSW, I want to reiterate that we had a great starting point 20 years ago, and proper, open, curriculum reform would give us the opportunity to lead internationally in this field, with all of the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits that that would bring our children. My own children are examples of young people who have thrived in the music education system here in NSW, but they have also been privately taught music to fill in the shortfalls of the school system. The cutting edge of music education research internationally is dealing with this exact problem, and measuring how to have music in schools reach every child, not just those with parents who can afford to fund it. There is much great work for us to draw on here in NSW.



I am a pluralist. While I am classically trained, and have had a very successful career as an art music composer, I recognise that classical music has no *extra* value that other musics do not have. The skills that I learned, that are valuable (after all, I've encouraged my own children to learn them), learning to read and write traditional music notation and understand notation-based music theory, are no *more* valuable than skills that are more centred in other musical cultures, such as improvisation, learning by ear, other forms of notation, technology-based musical understanding, or embodied music theory. The way that the drafts of the last syllabus bounced around between mandating "the old way" and being much more open (to all musics) was evidence of the kind of dichotomised thinking that the leading music education countries have left behind over the last two decades.

A proper review of the literature and engagement with the world's music curricula that are thriving the most will reveal this kind of pluralist approach, delivered by teachers trained in a wide range of ways of making music but, more importantly, to actively responding to the musical cultures around them that will most engage the young people in their community. This approach to music education results in a traditional classical system in some schools, Arabic drum groups in others, and perhaps rock and roll groups or DJing in others. Young people in these programs aspire to excellence, but we have *mixed expectations*, relevant to each student, that don't prioritise or privilege the child whose parents have been able to afford private piano lessons from the age of 5. Such programs are culturally enriching for *every* child, and build musical communities in schools.

The K-6 syllabus is quite open and would allow for this kind of approach immediately, but unfortunately NSW public schools have been hamstrung for over a decade with the support for specialist teachers who can teach it. Some have banded together, and share a specialist teacher for RFF (relief from face to face), although a problem with this solution is that such teachers face job insecurity as contracts are often year-to-year. Some principals have been visionary and used discretionary spending, but even then this can still be problematic as the Department does not have a code for a music teacher. In addition, while we at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music train around half of NSW's music teachers, and we do introduce them all to primary school pedagogies, we can only be accredited to train secondary music teachers, because NESA does not accredit music as a Primary Teaching Specialisation.

This results in two problems: although we teach some primary pedagogies, and teachers are allowed to teach in primary schools with this minimal preparation, they waste time learning things they don't need, and we don't get to deliver the depth we'd like to if we knew we were teaching primary pre-service teachers from the start. Second, because there is no pathway, a limited number of students follow the workaround (of becoming secondary accredited first), meaning that even if NSW public schools were able to hire



specialist music teachers as schools in other Australian states can, there would not be enough teachers available.

And so, I want to finish with solutions, not problems. These solutions are my recommendations for the Joint Committee. Apart from the funding of teachers in low ICSEA and rural areas, they cost very little money and would be simple to implement within the current administrations. After the solutions, I am providing short bullet points responding to some of the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry, just in case it isn't clear which points I have addressed. And as I said at the start, if any members of the Joint Select Committee would like to speak to me formally or informally, my office is just down the road, or I can pop up to you. I'm on .

### **Solutions to the three problems I have identified and explored above**

#### **(a) not providing a formal process for specialist music teachers to be employed in primary schools**

- i) Add Music as a Primary Teaching Specialisation in ITE primary degrees. The University of Sydney already has a primary teacher degree with other specialisations, and this one could be added within a year; we could also create a graduate diploma for existing teachers wanting to skill-up and add this accreditation.
- ii) Make a music teacher specialisation an employment code for department schools and create a start-up fund for schools in low ICSEA and rural areas to target music teachers.

#### **(b) not reviewing our music syllabi regularly or systematically to remain at the forefront of curriculum internationally**

- i) Most states and territories, in addition to ACARA, are reviewing music syllabi at least every 4 years. This also removes pressure to fix so many problems from a 20-year-old syllabus. Make a commitment to do this.

#### **(c) in the last decade, having allowed the curriculum reform/renewal process to become secretive and controlled by non-music education experts with non-music education priorities.**

- i) Independently review the best curriculum renewal processes from around the world and adopt a much more open policy to syllabus development. Share such reviews.
- ii) Develop a proper, open, and independent approach to Evidence-Based Practice in education, noting that it is a contested field and much work needs to be done. Given that we have already begun an international research group on this topic for music education, we would be delighted to help.



- iii) Have an open and public ambition to provide the best music curriculum in the world, drawing on both research and practice internationally.
  - iv) Publish the results of consultations and public submissions.
  - v) Publish reasoning behind changes in each draft, and respond to key points in consultations and submissions.
  - vi) If NESA remains the coordinating/administering body, it needs independent leadership of syllabus writing teams (i.e. an independent music educator or music education scholar), so it's the dog that is wagging the tail, not the other way around.
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### **The above points in relation to the Terms of Reference**

- (b) the quality and effectiveness of music education and training, including:  
(i) progress towards a long-term goal of quality music education, including actions to address identified barriers,

Historically (until the early 2000s), NSW was a world-leading provider of secondary music education thanks to cutting-edge syllabi. Sadly, these have been allowed to stagnate, and the most recent syllabus reform is not at all ambitious. This can be fixed, though.

The biggest barrier to excellent music education in NSW public primary schools is the lack of specialist accreditation of primary music teachers, and the lack of a Department code or policy or support for schools to hire specialist music teachers. The first two points are not only easy to fix but will cost next to no money.

- (ii) the present level and status of formal music education across all levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary levels,

As above. I think that tertiary music is generally very healthy, because (unlike the school syllabi) it is responding to the workplace and diverse musical cultures. At the Sydney Conservatorium of Music we have opened several new degrees since 2016 to respond to the industry.

It could also be noted that music education is struggling in the curriculum worldwide because of an out-of-proportion focus on English and STEM.

- (iii) robust and evidence-based music education in initial teacher education courses in the tertiary sector,

The Australian model, and the NSW model in particular through CESE, for Evidence-Based Practice, is extremely weak. An independent model and independent bodies are





needed. We are running a symposium on this topic for music education in September-October and would welcome government involvement.

(v) the efficacy of the current primary and secondary school curriculum in delivering learning outcomes in music related subjects,

As above, has stagnated over the last 20 years, and reform/review is undertaken poorly, and in secrecy.

(vi) the availability of support for teachers and principals in delivering quality music education and ensuring that an inclusive approach is taken towards resource allocation for regional schools across New South Wales,

There are better experts than I on this, but I am suggesting that low ICSEA and rural schools need proper funding for music teachers, once the administration has been put in place (as it is in other states).

(vii) the most effective approach for the music and the creative industries to co-ordinate with the education system to support the development of creative skills,

Following my suggestions for much more ambitious syllabus reform processes (and generally higher ambitions – note, some teachers will try to protect their territory!), syllabi should become better related to real life post-school music practices. This is what has happened in NSW tertiary institutions.

Open syllabus reform would also have the benefit of talking to the tertiary sector (including TAFE and private music colleges) to find out what skills school-leavers really need today. Much of the current Stage 6 (HSC) syllabus is completely meaningless to tertiary music education (specifically, the “Concepts” content).

(viii) ways that students can learn entrepreneurial skills and gain industry experience to ensure they are job ready,

As above. Lifelong learning is also important – music is a great enricher of adult life.

(xi) notable approaches to music education in other jurisdictions, and

My reading of the research and observation of best practice around the world is that CRP (culturally responsive pedagogy) is engaging the most student successfully and revolutionising music education in keeping with fast changes in other areas of music learning (for instance, being able to self-teach from social media platforms like YouTube



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or TikTok). ITE generally will welcome reform to be able to more explicitly prepare teachers for a CRP approach that draws on all musics plurally.