

Submission
No 115

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

Name: Name suppressed
Date Received: 21 November 2024

Partially
Confidential

To: The Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales

RE: CHANGES TO STAGE 6 and HSC DRAMA

Dear Members of the Inquiry

I was the _____ and a 30+ year veteran of HSC Drama teaching, judging and marking employed by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA). I have been invited to express my serious concerns regarding the proposed changes to the HSC Drama syllabus and assessment.

The HSC Drama program has long been distinguished by its emphasis on performance-based assessment, which has proven instrumental in developing students' creative, collaborative, and communication skills, key 21st century competencies. Currently, HSC Drama students are equitably and externally examined in three key component areas:

1. **Individual Project** – a major work where students selected one option out of 10 including individual performance, costume design, set design, promotional design, lighting design, scriptwriting, video drama, directing portfolio, research and theatre criticism
2. **Group Performance** – the core component – students present an original devised group performance in front of visiting NESA examiners, representing months of creativity, collaboration and critical thinking.
3. Two **written essays** based on the two content areas students have studied practically

The new draft syllabus and assessment documents have now been released to considerable concern in the Drama community and the following have raised the most concern regarding the equity for HSC Drama students across the state:

1. **Individual Project** – the removal of video drama (the third highest candidature in HSC Drama Project area) and the downgrading of all other project areas to “digital submission” is retrograde and against best industry practice.
2. **Ensemble Performance** – created by students as an internal assessment only. Instead students will be asked to write about their performance. This is a significant backward step for all Drama students, as performance outcomes will only be examined by a new written question which will remove equity for lower literacy students
3. Two **written essays** based on two diminished content areas, plus a written response about an ensemble performance. The written examination will now be longer, which will disadvantage students with lower literacy, learning needs, neuro diversities, EALD and NESB students.

The proposed draft of the Drama syllabus downgrades and sidelines the performance aspect of the subject by changing the style and content of the written exam. This leaves us in the untenable position of having a performing arts syllabus without a significant and appropriate emphasis on practical performance. The removal of the Group Performance will also see student school assessment marks (which include performance and making outcomes) being moderated by written only exams. This is a poor assessment practice and, as shown during COVID, will unfairly impact our most marginalised and disadvantaged students.

Research cited within NESA's own syllabus documentation substantiates the unique capacity of Drama to enhance collaborative skills, foster creativity, and develop advanced communication abilities. The Group Performance component has been exceptionally effective in achieving these educational outcomes while providing students with authentic opportunities for creative and collaborative expression—an increasingly rare commodity in contemporary education. This is at a time when the Premier of NSW proposes a strict social media ban, in an effort to ensure students remain disconnected from digital devices and connected to their own communities.

Further, returning to a written only high stakes examination contradicts the latest research. The future of assessment needs to be multi-modal, performance based, student-driven and will include longer capstone style projects that are authentic demonstrations of real-world intelligence and are truly criterion assessed¹. While NESA maintains that their consultation process remains ongoing, there is no indication that the significant concerns raised by experienced educators are being adequately considered.

The current trajectory risks diminishing the vibrancy and effectiveness of our already successful performing arts syllabus. The systematic reduction of opportunities for students to demonstrate skills beyond narrowly defined written examinable assessment criteria is particularly concerning, notably by the extension of the written examination, which will advantage drama students who have strong literacy skills, but disadvantage those who do not. Equity and parity among students are at risk. This seems to contradict the terms of reference of the Review that committed to 'meet the needs of a wide range of students, including those who are Aboriginal, or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or living with disabilities.'²

¹ Lucas, B. (2021). Rethinking assessment in education: The case for change. *CSE Leading Education Series*(2), 1-42.

² Terms of Reference – NSW Curriculum Review, September 2018, p. 1.

To ensure our education system continues to serve all students effectively, we urge you to do the following:

1. Direct NESA to genuinely engage with the feedback provided during the consultation period from teachers, students and curriculum experts
2. Provide a new draft syllabus that adequately respects teacher and academic expertise
3. Give appropriate weight to the expert opinions of experienced drama teachers
4. Return the Group Performance as an external examination for HSC Drama and reinstate popular options such as Video Drama and Director's Portfolio
5. Remove digital submission of tactile major works such as Set Design and Costume Design

The integrity of the performing arts is at stake in NSW schools and beyond, as similar concerns have been raised by my professional peers teaching both HSC Music and HSC Dance. I have serious concerns about NESA's process as they have developed an untenable syllabus that does not adequately and equitably support all Drama students in NSW Schools.

Yours sincerely,