

**Submission  
No 116**

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

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## **Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales**

### **NSW Curriculum Reform: Proposed Stage 6 Music syllabuses**

#### **Executive summary**

This submission to the Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales is written by Dr Rachel White. My discipline is music education, and I have experience teaching music at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, as well as researching effective senior secondary music teaching in NSW. I have a robust understanding of the syllabuses in theory and in practice, as well as the how syllabuses are enacted within a broader educational context.

This submission specifically focuses on the current proposed Stage 6 syllabuses and assessment requirements for Music 1, Music 2, and Music Extension. It is based on analysis of the proposed syllabus documents, knowledge about the current Stage 6 syllabuses, the new Music 7 – 10 syllabus, and prior research into music teaching in NSW.

This submission explores the following issues:

- **Equity and student choice:** The proposed syllabuses have erased all forms of student choice in content and assessment, presenting issues with equity around student musical and literacy abilities, disadvantaging all students without years of training in performance.
- **Lack of continuity with the Music 7 – 10 syllabus:** There are now discrepancies with language and content structures that do not allow for a natural, logical progression of learning. There are also more opportunities for individual development in Stage 5 than in Stage 6, which is counter-intuitive to best practice.
- **Arbitrary restrictions and stipulations:** There are various aspects of the proposed syllabuses that present confusing or contradictory representations of content or learning, including mentions of ‘prescribed’ repertoire with no examples of what this might look like. There are also now external assessment restrictions on composition and ensemble performances that are arbitrary and unjustifiable.
- **Practical implications:** These proposed syllabuses will impact Stage 6 Music enrolments, ATARs and scaling, opportunities for teacher professional development, and put an unnecessary burden on teacher workloads.

The proposed syllabuses do not represent best, evidence-based practice in music teaching and learning. I support the calls for all Music syllabuses to be immediately suspended and removed for consideration, and for the syllabus development process to start again, with transparency and consultation that reflects the diverse teaching and learning landscape in NSW. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues raised in this submission further with the Joint Select Committee.

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## **Proposed Stage 6 Music syllabuses: Key issues**

As with many music educators around NSW, reviewing the current proposed syllabuses for Music 1, Music 2, and Music Extension has left me with a number of concerns and questions, as well as significant levels of confusion about how these syllabuses came to be, who made the final decisions, and whether the changes were influenced by best practice in curriculum design, or cost-cutting. It is possible to see that music disciplinary expertise has been consulted for the syllabus development, but this expertise has been greatly overshadowed by changes to content and assessment practices that have clearly been set by external consultants with no musical expertise or experience, as well as other proposed changes that do not reflect current teaching and school experiences in NSW. The Music 1 and Music 2 syllabuses have long been in need of an overhaul, but these changes needed to reflect contemporary understandings about the capacity and interests of young musicians, as well as evidence-based practice in music education and curriculum design. The proposed syllabuses do not reflect this.

These are some of the key issues that I have noted in my examination of the proposed syllabuses.

### *Equity and student choice*

One of the best aspects of the existing Music syllabuses is the capacity for students and teachers to adjust the syllabuses to suit their interests and context. This is particularly the case in Music 1, where there are currently no mandated topics, which means teachers can work with students to sequence their learning in Stage 6 in a way that reflects best practice in learner engagement, learner support, and contextual resources. While there are mandated topics in Music 2, teachers and students still have the opportunity to choose elective topics in Year 11 and 12. These opportunities for choice are highly valuable, as student performance and assessment programs need to link in with the topics studied in Year 12. Having broad topics such as “Instrument and its Repertoire”, or “Music for Small Ensembles” means that Music is a highly inclusive subject, that can cater to learner diversity on many levels. The opportunity for elective areas – where students can choose to perform, compose, or present oral musical analysis (viva voces) – also makes Music 1, in particular, a subject where students are able to develop assessment programs that speak to their strengths. These opportunities for choice are not only excellent examples of differentiated practice, they allow students to understand their musical strengths and interests, as they begin to explore the many pathways into the music industry.

The proposed Music syllabuses have completely changed all of this. All forms of student choice have been erased, and options for external assessment have been significantly limited across all courses. There are now seven mandated topics in each Music course, with the Year 12 topics very clearly leaning into popular music for Music 1, and Western art music in Music 2. A lack of options means

that in Music 1, all students who are not popular music-focused are disadvantaged, and in Music 2, all students who are not art music-focused are disadvantaged. Students who are highly capable jazz musicians, musical theatre performers, or who work in any kind of folk or world music genre will have immense difficulties developing a performance program in either course (since they have no other option). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians will also have difficulty finding their place.

For the external assessments, Music 1 in particular has been reduced to two performances and a two hour written exam, with no options for viva voces or composition. This represents not only a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of music teaching and learning, it also presents enormous equity issues, as students are forced to conform to arbitrary mandates rather than develop as musicians. It greatly disadvantages any students who are not strong performers (but may be excellent composers, or capable of wide listening and research). It also puts more pressure on students with varying literacy levels, as 50% of the external examination will now be dependent on their capacity to *write about* music (as opposed to playing it, creating it, or even talking about it). This is also the case in Music Extension – instead of students being able to focus their passions on what they do best, their practical options (performance or composition) have been reduced, and all students now have to sit a written exam, again worth 50% of their mark. These changes to course electives and external assessment requirements seem capricious at best, and do not reflect best practice in teaching, nor an understanding of the wide range of pathways possible in the music industry.

#### *Lack of continuity with the Music 7 – 10 syllabus*

These proposed syllabuses are not just a significant step backward in terms of best practice in music teaching and learning, they are an illogical continuation of the teaching and learning experiences set in the Music 7 - 10 syllabus. Both Music 1 and Music 2 now include an overly complicated section about ‘Music language’, which seems to break down ‘language’ into theoretical aspects, music terminology, music notation, and compositional devices... but not the elements of music. Looking at the way these components have been separated, there’s actually quite a lot of overlap – it is entirely unclear how or why these components have been created. By comparison, all of these components have been contained in the descriptions of the ‘Elements of music’ in the 7 – 10 syllabus.

There are no mandated topics in Music 7 – 10, only a list of five broad genres that students need to engage with at some point throughout Stage 4 and 5. This is at complete odds with the mandated topics for Stage 6.

Lastly, in Stage 5 (Years 9 – 10), students are now expected to undertake a ‘depth study’ – an opportunity for them to individually or collaboratively explore an area of interest in more depth, in

order to apply knowledge, understanding and skills. It is quite amazing that the Stage 5 syllabus allows for more freedom and autonomy in student learning compared to Stage 6, where the syllabus allows for very little opportunities for individual pursuit of interests, if at all. This, again, goes against pedagogical understanding of how student learning capacities develop, as well as making students ill-prepared for a future that expects adults, in all industries, to make their own choices about their creative, social, and cultural pathways.

### *Arbitrary restrictions and stipulations*

Throughout all the Music syllabuses, there are now many examples of seemingly arbitrary restrictions being placed, or stipulations that lead to a lack of clarity of expectations. Examples of these include:

- **Music 1, p. 20:** In the topic of ‘Music of contemporary popular music styles’, students explore music from a range of contemporary genres, “reflecting music currently being written, recorded and performed”. Firstly, if it’s being currently written or recorded, students won’t be able to know about it as it will not have been released. As for music currently being performed, The Rolling Stones (est. 1962) just completed a tour of North America earlier this year, moving onto Europe in 2025. Are they considered contemporary for current senior secondary students? What does this statement actually mean about what students should be studying?
- **Music 2, p. 7 and 10:** The content for this syllabus is “derived from an evolution of musical conventions and language over an extensive timeframe”. However, in Year 11, students go from learning about European Baroque and Classical music (about 1600 – 1820) in Term 1, to art and popular music from the 1960s onwards in Term 2. How are students meant to understand the evolution of musical conventions when they are jumping over 200 years between topics?
- For **external performance assessments**, there are now stipulations about the number of performers allowed for an ensemble piece. In Music 1 and 2, it says, “The term ‘ensemble’ refers to any piece presented by two to three performers” and “A performance may be accompanied by one, two or three instruments”. But also, accompaniment may be pre-recorded, with no stipulations on how many instruments can be playing in the pre-record. In Music Extension, “‘Ensemble’ performance refers to any piece presented by three or more performers”. There is absolutely no logic to how these specifications have been determined or why they are necessary. They greatly disadvantage students across all genres, particularly students who perform in rock bands (typically at least 4 people on guitar, bass, drums, and vocals), as well as art music ensembles (Quartets or larger ensembles of any form are no go).

- For the **external composition assessment** in Music 2, students are now only allowed to compose for a duet or trio. There is no justification for this restriction on instrumentation for composition and given the focus on Western art music in Music 2, it seems baffling that students will be denied the opportunity to compose for the kinds of ensembles they would be learning about throughout the course, such as orchestras, chamber ensembles, choirs, or literally any ensemble of a quartet size or larger. In Music Extension, students are restricted to composing for a ‘small ensemble’, but as is demonstrated by these proposed syllabuses, there seems to be a distinct lack of clarity of what ‘small ensemble’ even means. These specifications are entirely unnecessary.
- There is mention of ‘**prescribed**’ pieces for Music 1 and Music Extension. These prescribed lists of pieces have not been provided, nor is it clear how they will be determined appropriate for study, or who will make these prescriptions. Oddly, there is no mention of prescribed pieces for Music 2, but students do have to study ‘substantial’ pieces of music. There is no description of how teachers can determine what should be considered a ‘substantial’ piece of music.

### *Practical implications*

There are a number of practical implications if these proposed syllabuses are published without significant changes.

- In many schools across NSW, Music 1 is the only Stage 6 Music course offered to students. Some schools are able to run separate classes for Music 1 and Music 2, and there are about three schools in the state that exclusively run Music 2. However, there are also schools that run Music 1 and Music 2, but due to restrictions in teaching space and timetabling, need to combine students into one ‘Music’ class. The flexibility afforded by the current syllabuses makes this tricky for teachers, but feasible. With the proposed syllabuses, particularly with the mandated topics for each course, this will no longer be possible. What this will likely mean is those schools will revert to running Music 1 exclusively, forcing the students otherwise capable of doing Music 2 to either enrol in Music 1, or drop Music entirely. This will likely contribute to a drop in Music 2 enrolments, especially in schools that are not wealthy and resourced enough to offer separate classes (where Music 2 is already in dominance), and a drop in Music enrolments overall.
- It is well known that Music 1, in particular, does not scale well unless students achieve a very high mark. This is due to a number of factors, not least being the way in which the current syllabuses are designed and how they are offered in schools. At the moment, the flexibility

offered by the elective components of Music 1 allow students to structure their assessment program to best suit their abilities and achieve the best mark possible. The proposed restrictions to this will ultimately disadvantage those students who benefit from that flexibility, causing further disparities in achievement, and continuing issues with scaling and the ATAR.

- The proposed cuts to all external examination options not only represents a decline in options for students, it also will mean far fewer opportunities for teachers to engage in what is often cited as ‘the best professional development they’ve ever done’ – HSC marking. Many teachers relish the opportunity throughout Term 3 and Term 4 to not only experience the diversity of student creativity and performance, but to engage with and learn from colleagues across the state while developing a deeper understanding of best practice for HSC Music. Cuts to electives, and an increase in written exams, will significantly affect how teachers can participate in this professional learning.
- Finally, despite NESA claiming these syllabuses will “make it easier for teachers to plan for learning”, the enormity of the proposed changes will put an extensive burden on teachers, especially in Music 1, as they will be required to prepare entirely new programs to suit the mandated topics, arbitrary expectations, and prescribed content that is not yet made available.

Transparency around the development of the Music syllabuses and the justification of their significant changes has been staggeringly lacking. The fact that so many of these changes are not in line with best, evidence-based practice has led many people, myself included, to believe that the changes being proposed are not "to ensure it equips students to contribute to Australian society in the 21st century", as stipulated by the Curriculum Review terms of reference, but are instead a result of attempts to cut costs, without any concern for ensuring how the syllabuses can best meet the needs of the diverse cohort that undertakes Stage 6 Music every year. These proposed syllabuses will not equip students, of all musical abilities, with the skills, knowledge, and passion to prepare them for creative and complex engagement with the music industry, and will likely serve as a deterrent for many students who figure they can just play and create music in their own time without having to conform to arbitrary mandates.

In short, these new syllabuses seem to be privileging cost cutting and unjustifiable mandates over best practice, student needs, and industry preparation. The lack of transparency and communication from NESA has left music educators baffled and worried about the future of their subject, and leaves tertiary educators like myself concerned about the future of music teacher preparation.

I support the calls already made by colleagues to NESA and the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education – to restart the process of Stage 6 Music syllabus development to ensure senior secondary students in NSW are provided with Music courses that suit their needs, reflect best practice in music education, and are created through a transparent process reflecting an understanding of the NSW educational landscape.

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