

Supplementary  
Submission  
No 21a

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

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

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

Thank you for the invitation to make a second submission to the Inquiry. I understand that this submission and related hearings are made in response to the widespread condemnation of the draft year 11-12 Music syllabi recently released by NESAs.

Since I am already on the record about the contents and extensive weakness of these documents, and am aware that music teachers and academics are united on those problems, I will not seek to prosecute that case further in this submission. If my expertise is important to the panel, you can read the article that Dr Jennifer Carter and I wrote in the AARE (Australian Association for Research in Education) blog, [Research Matters](#), and also what I had to say on the [ABC](#). I am the corresponding author on [the letter from 31 of Australia's leading academics to Minister Prue Car](#), asking her to have NESAs withdraw the drafts, and start again after this Inquiry makes its findings and recommendations, with a new, transparent process. I fully support the current [petition to parliament](#) to this same end.

Instead, I would like to use this opportunity to reiterate that (1) I do not believe that under its current governance structures, NESAs is capable of producing a competent music curriculum, let alone a world-leading one, and that (2) those structures are secretive, lead to non-music experts having oversized influence on music curriculum, separate the resulting syllabi from the research evidence base, and exclude experts and stakeholders from the process.

When I gave evidence to the panel at its second hearing, I stated:

*NESAs approach to syllabus review and reform has become secretive and ideologically-driven.*

*Recent music syllabus review has been undertaken behind Non-Disclosure Agreements. The public, including experts, were invited to "have their say", but submissions were not*

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*published, and the writing group did not explain how they had responded to feedback in subsequent releases.*

*The resulting syllabus has not kept up with international research and practice. It is clearly not Evidence-Based, despite NESA's claims to the contrary.*

While the response to the new 11-12 draft syllabi may be surprising to members of the select committee, it is not to those of us in music education scholarship and practice. The first draft of the 7-10 Music syllabus, released by NESA over 2 years ago, was equally horrific. I wrote to the Education Minister at the time, The Hon. Sarah Mitchell, pointing out that the syllabus directly contradicted its own evidence-base. We offered to write a report that would show more clearly how out of step NESA were with research and best-practice in Music Education.

When that appeal was unsuccessful, I led a group of music teachers and music education academics who analysed the draft and published a public report anyway, which we forwarded to the minister, and through the opaque NESA feedback mechanism. We actually contacted several of the leading music education researchers who were cited in NESA's own evidence base, who then all slammed the draft syllabus and the direction NESA was taking it in. [You can read the report and those submissions here.](#)

While the 7-10 Syllabus was improved from that first draft, the published version was only a little better than the version that had come before it, and clearly a long way off being a world-leading music syllabus. One of the big backward steps was the introduction of 113 "content points" points to be taught, busy-work for teachers that has not been in any NSW music syllabus for the last 40 years, and the last thing we need in the middle of a teacher crisis. Implicit in the final published document was that NESA just don't understand, as an organisation, what learning in music *is*, what it entails, and even if they did, how to write this in a template that they have developed for other subjects under simplified assumptions (this is the ideology I refer to above) about what knowledge is, and how it is imparted (that were much more nuanced and sophisticated in the Masters Report (2020) on which they are based).

So, we knew that the 11-12 Syllabus would be poor, and it was just a question of how bad it would be.

There are a number of NESA's incorrect assumptions about learning in music that were revealed when you questioned Dr Paul Cahill at the same hearing that I appeared at. Dr Cahill said that the Music 7-10 syllabus process was transparent, but did not address any of the issues I described above. Dr Cahill also suggested that "the syllabus is not a pedagogical document". As I wrote on my blog shortly after:



While the idea that the Standards Authority don't tell teachers how to teach the syllabus content is a noble one (especially considering the deprofessionalisation of teachers over the last 20 years in NSW ([Buchanan, 2020](#))), it's simply not true that the new (7-10) Syllabus isn't a pedagogical document. I'm working on a research paper to show this in some detail, but here are the key facts:

- The strongest pedagogical influence on the NSW syllabi is the Comprehensive Musicianship movement of the 1960s and 1970s ([MENC, 1965](#); Jeaneret et al., 2003), which established
  - Approaches for students to integrate learning *about* music (history, theory, aural skills, etc.) with traditional performing skills, as well as improvisation and composition
  - "Elements" or "Concepts" of music as a written framework of categories for thinking *about* music.
- The influence of this pedagogy is first seen in NSW syllabi in the 1980s, and hasn't changed much since (including in the new syllabus)
- While the new syllabus is supposedly the first rewrite since 2003, it retains the same pedagogical approach to thinking *about* music, with some minor changes to the nomenclature
- In the new syllabus, the explicit integration of learning experiences (Performing, Composing and Listening) of comprehensive musicianship is also retained, but the nomenclature is also adjusted, describing these experiences instead as "Focus Areas" and changing "integration" to "interrelated".
  - Since there is no music education research that suggests these nomenclature changes have any benefit, it is assumed that these changes are merely enforced to ensure alignment with the most "important" academic subjects, such as Maths and English.
- The NSW syllabus, as well as the Australian Curriculum, also show influence of pedagogies developed in the 1960s and 1970s in the "Creative Music Movement" (e.g. [Painter & Aston, 1970](#); [Schafer, 1967](#); [Southcott & Burke, 2006](#)), in the centring of Australian contemporary repertoire and students taking an active hand in composing and improvising – these influences remain in the new syllabus
- The 1990s pedagogical approaches to current thinking about multiculturalism in Australia, and how it ought to affect music education, which influenced Cultural Diversity pedagogies that developed into the new millennium ([Campbell et al., 2000](#))

As you can see, the new syllabus is packed-full of pedagogies that influence everything that happens. Sadly, on top of that, the new (7-10) syllabus packed 113 content points to-be-taught, many of which are what Elliott and Silverman ([2015](#)) call "verbal knowledge", that is written or spoken knowledge *about* music rather than musical knowledge



(knowledge and musical skills such as playing an instrument, singing, improvising, composing).

This latter criticism leads us directly onto what we see in these draft syllabi – an emphasis on “verbal knowledge” in an art form where that kind of knowledge is (and should be) secondary to the art form itself – music. While it is very neat to have bullet lists of content to be taught, any understanding of music curriculum research internationally would have told NESAs that in music that’s very problematic, because each music is culturally situated and therefore has its own knowledge(s), whether those be musical skills, theoretical understanding, or completely different ontologies (ways of being within that musical culture).

Several friends who attended a NESAs feedback meeting with Dr Cahill yesterday said that he asked several times about *the rigour*.

In music, *rigour* just isn’t a fixed thing. For example, my daughter is a young upcoming jazz soloist, and that will be most of her repertoire when she undertakes the Music 1 HSC exam next year. Rigour in jazz education would include a host of unique knowledges, including knowing standards (repertoire), scales and modes and how to use them in connection to key and harmony, common chord progressions, chord names and functions, metre and feel, including swing and groove, chord voicings, voice leading, and much more. These elements of a rigorous jazz education could indeed be listed out in a syllabus, but then you’d need a similar list for every other music.

My daughter also performs in Gondwana Voices, one of Australia’s premier children’s choirs. She just returned from a 3 week trip around Europe, where she performed at The Barbican on London’s South Bank, La Madeleine in Paris, and Basilica de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. Rigour in choral singing includes the ability to sight sing complex pitch and rhythm, to be able to hear and replicate intervals, to blend tonally, to pronounce texts in more than a dozen languages, to understand the role of your part within a piece structurally and harmonically, and much more. Since they sang repertoire from Medieval Europe to contemporary Australia, they have to understand and enact all kinds of complex cultural contexts within their performance. Again, one could try and turn this into a list of bulleted content points, but it would completely miss the point of what musical knowledge *is*, which is this complex tapestry of enactive, embodied, and intellectual undertakings, all culturally situated.

If we want our students to be able to show all of these knowledges, we need a syllabus that values (and assesses!) them all, and freedom for students to specialise where their own particular talents lie, whether that be playing a Chopin Nocturne, singing a jazz standard, or producing some Electronic Dance Music. These are, also, the knowledges



that will step them from school into happy musical lives, into tertiary music study, and for some, the music industry.

While it is easy to work out, from these draft syllabi, what NESA *don't* know, or are ignoring, it is much harder to understand *why* they are doing some things the way they are. Why a 2 hour and 10 minute exam in Music 1, the “music for everyone” subject that is the most popular in the country, or in Music Extension? Why cut back the options for young people to learn by composing music in any style for any kind of ensemble in the music 1 *and* music 2 courses? Why mandated topics and the narrowing of teacher and student choice and possible specialisations?

The rumour circulating among music teachers is that since these measures obviously can't be pedagogical or evidence-based, they must be done for cost-cutting reasons.

But we don't know. And we don't know, because NESA's syllabus development processes have been allowed to become secretive and opaque. Writers and advisors work behind Non-Disclosure Agreements. The experiences of those people is reported to be that they are routinely ignored, or that when they have created drafts they are happy with, unknown people in other departments in NESA (especially assessment, we hear), make decisions that undo much of the good work and change the way the whole syllabi were designed to work. One member of the TAG who worked on the 7-10 Syllabus later told me that they were promised that the “content-points” that I mentioned above would only be provided as guidance for teachers, and explicitly *not* as a list of things to be taught. They were furious when the syllabus was published.

At NESA, the only thing we can be sure about, is that the tail wags the dog.

That the Standards Authority can now have produced 2 mediocre syllabi (that will affect every child in the state under the age of 14 from next year), and have still been allowed to produce these new terrible drafts, in my view is a travesty. I am sure there are many fine people who work at NESA, but it is now unequivocally clear that under their current governance structures, they are not capable of producing even competent music syllabi. They have produced their own evidence to this end, and must be held accountable for that work.

Accountable must mean the immediate withdrawal of these syllabi, and an admission that they were very poor documents. They must not be allowed to simply make changes to them, nor to move toward a second round of “have your say” as they did with the unpopular first draft of the 7-10 Music syllabus. These documents are based on flawed thinking, affected by systematic problems, and need to be started again, properly.



Before the writing starts again, from scratch, we need the Minister to properly restructure the development process so that “the tail does not wag the dog” as NESA develop them. We need the reasoning behind the drafts, including consultation with tertiary music institutions, the music industry, and community music, as well as engagement with the very latest research evidence, to show us how the new documents are world-leading.

The TAGs need to respond to early drafts on the public record, so that the machinations of the development can be understood. This will allow teachers and other stakeholders to engage fully in a “have your say” period. When NESA departments from outside music ask the writing groups for changes, these should be on the record, so we can understand the interplay of consistent curriculum development and subject expertise – so one is not prevailing at the cost of the other. Preferably, members of the writing team and the experience they bring to the process will be published.

Finally, I want to make the point that the syllabi for K-6 and for 7-10 were not really reformed. It’s especially clear how the 7-10 syllabus was simply adapted into NESA speak. Therefore, I would strongly recommend to the committee that the government commit to a second round of curriculum review in Music within the next 4 years, with an aim of (a) making it as transparent as I’ve suggested above, (b) making it really world-leading, and (c) to align bottom-up the K-12 music curriculum in our great state.

As I said in my opening statement to the Inquiry at the hearing:

When you were undertaking th[e first] hearing, Tom [Fienberg] and I were attending the World Conference of the International Society for Music Education in Finland. The week before that we were at the Music In Schools commission in Estonia.

The message I bring from these conferences to the committee is that through this process, you are reading submissions by and meeting with not just with the musicians of NSW, but with professionals working at the very highest international standard. We really are “up there” with the best in the world.

So, we have the people. But we do *not* have the curriculum.

With warm wishes,