

**Submission  
No 117**

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

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# Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales

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## Introduction

As a music teacher at a public high school in the Inner West of Sydney, I see every day how students flourish when given the opportunity to engage with a flexible and inclusive music syllabus. Music offers students a platform to express themselves, connect with their cultural identities, and explore creativity through action. Teaching music isn't about teaching students to learn *about* music—it's about teaching them to *be* musicians.

Many of my students approach music as active participants: they compose, perform, and collaborate like real-world artists. This process nurtures creativity, confidence, and critical thinking. However, the proposed Stage 6 draft syllabuses for Music 1 and Music 2 risk turning music into an overly academic subject, disconnected from the dynamic, practical experiences that inspire students. These changes reduce flexibility, increase content and exam burdens, and fail to reflect the diversity of student interests and the evolving nature of music itself.

## What These Changes Mean for Me as a Classroom Teacher

### 1. Narrowing of Student Choice in Music 1

One of the most rewarding parts of teaching Music 1 is the ability to tailor lessons to the interests and strengths of my students. Whether they're exploring jazz, hip hop, electronic music, or classical traditions, they're able to connect with music in a way that feels relevant and personal.

The draft syllabus' mandatory "Focus Areas" remove this flexibility, restricting the range of topics available and forcing students into rigid categories. For example, I've taught students who used electronic music to compose soundscapes inspired by their cultural heritage. These opportunities would disappear under the proposed syllabus, leaving students disengaged and underrepresented.

As a teacher, this shift risks turning music into a box-ticking exercise rather than a subject where students can freely explore their creative potential.

### 2. Musicology as an Opportunity for Choice

Musicology has the potential to be one of the most engaging aspects of music education, but its current implementation as a rigid exam component misses the mark. Instead, musicology should be reframed as an elective, allowing students to explore the music they love and want to learn more about.

Imagine the possibilities of teaching musicology from a contextual lens—encouraging students to engage with the cultural and analytical diversity of music across genres and traditions. This approach would make musicology more meaningful, allowing students to draw personal and cultural

connections to the music they study. It's ultimately about giving students the freedom to explore their interests and find a place where they belong in music.

### **3. Elimination of Composition in Music 1**

Removing composition as a core element in Music 1 is deeply concerning. Composition is one of the most effective ways to engage students creatively and encourage them to express their ideas.

I've had students who struggled with performance find their voice through composition. One student created a series of works inspired by their cultural heritage, sharing them with pride during class. This was a breakthrough moment for their confidence and their connection to music. Taking away composition removes this opportunity, not only for creativity but also for success in a subject that should champion diverse strengths.

Additionally, the draft syllabus misses a significant opportunity to embrace modern tools by not including audio-recorded composition. Many of my students work with DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations) and other music technology to create professional-quality compositions. Recognising this in the syllabus would reflect the realities of contemporary music-making and allow students to demonstrate their skills in a relevant and accessible way.

### **4. Increased Workload and Exam Length**

The proposed changes to the assessment structure place unnecessary pressure on students and teachers. Extending the length of exams, such as the two-hour aural exam in Music 2, adds to this burden while prioritising rote learning over creative engagement.

Music exams should reflect the realities of how musicians work and learn—through action, not memorisation. Overly lengthy exams place undue stress on students and disproportionately benefit those with strong written skills, rather than showcasing the diverse range of abilities students bring to the subject.

For me as a teacher, the emphasis on extended exams means spending more time preparing students for test conditions and less time fostering their creativity through practical, hands-on music-making.

### **5. Failure to Emphasise Music as an Action**

Music is best learned through doing. In my classroom, students develop as musicians by composing, performing, and improvising—not just by analysing scores or studying concepts. The proposed syllabuses place too much emphasis on learning *about* music, rather than learning *through* it as active participants.

For example, the increased focus on prescribed written assessments shifts attention away from practical skills.

Students need to experience music as performers and creators, where they can apply knowledge dynamically. Failing to prioritise action over theory risks turning music into a passive, academic exercise, which is the opposite of what inspires students to pursue it.

### **6. Limited Cultural Representation**

Teaching in a diverse high school means working with students who bring a range of cultural experiences and musical traditions to the classroom. Music education should reflect this diversity, encouraging students to explore and celebrate their heritage.

The draft syllabuses fail to adequately include non-Western and contemporary music practices in meaningful ways. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music is mentioned, it feels tokenistic rather than integral to the curriculum. For my students, this represents a missed opportunity to engage with music that feels personal and relevant to their lives.

## Recommendations

Based on these concerns, I urge the government to act on the Parliamentary Inquiry's recommendations:

1. **Suspend the Draft Syllabuses:** Halt the implementation of the current drafts to avoid disengagement among students and teachers.
2. **Restart the Review Process:**
  - a. **Transparency:** Clearly communicate how feedback from educators is incorporated into the process.
  - b. **Genuine Consultation:** Actively involve classroom teachers, particularly from diverse schools, to ensure the syllabus reflects real-world teaching and learning needs.
  - c. **Focus on Action:** Reframe the syllabus to prioritise music as an active, creative process, ensuring practical engagement remains at the core of learning.
3. **Emphasise Inclusivity and Flexibility:** Restore the flexibility of Music 1 to allow students to explore a broader range of topics and ensure composition is reinstated as a core element. Integrate diverse musical practices, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions, in meaningful ways.
4. **Reframe Musicology:** Offer musicology as an elective that allows students to explore the music they are passionate about, with an emphasis on cultural and contextual diversity.
5. **Modernise Assessment:** Reduce the length and rigidity of exams across Music 1 and Music 2, ensuring they reflect the realities of music-making rather than academic testing. Integrate audio-recorded composition as a valid assessment method, recognising the importance of contemporary music technology.

## Conclusion

Music education should inspire students to think and act like musicians. It should reflect their diverse interests, challenge them to grow creatively, and provide pathways to success for every learner. The proposed draft syllabuses undermine these goals, introducing rigidity and academic burdens that will limit the potential of students and teachers alike.

By acting on the Parliamentary Inquiry's recommendations, the government has an opportunity to create a syllabus that supports creativity, celebrates diversity, and reflects the dynamic nature of music. This will ensure that music education in NSW remains relevant, inclusive, and impactful for generations to come.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Luke Chapman  
Music Teacher