

**Submission
No 118**

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

Name: Caitlin Sandiford
Date Received: 21 November 2024

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

Caitlin Sandiford
Classroom Music Teacher, Musician, Research Student and Casual Academic

Wednesday 20th November, 2024

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

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission to the Inquiry. I appreciate the opportunity to have a voice as an individual in this important discussion on music education in NSW. In particular, I understand that this submission is to address the NSW curriculum reform and the NSW Education Standards Authority's (NESA) consultation process for the arts and music syllabuses reviews. I would like to first acknowledge that the following are my own thoughts and do not represent my employer.

I write to you as a practicing musician, research student, casual academic, and as someone nearing the end of my Early Career Teacher phase of music teaching. In this submission, I will primarily refer to my individual experiences as a classroom teacher in a public school in Western Sydney to address the issues above.

For the past five years, I have experienced the pleasures (and challenges!) of teaching Music, among other subjects, in a variety of contexts. Teaching at my current school has been the most impactful of my career so far, primarily because I have been provided with the support and trust that is needed to create and grow meaningful music programs that are responsive to my students and my school community.

Like all school communities, this one is unique. Over a third of students are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and another third are from Pasifika backgrounds. The school's *Trauma-Informed Practice* and *Positive Behaviour for Learning* approaches prioritise the needs of students to ensure a meaningful education can be provided. Teachers are trained in these approaches, and are then given the *trust* and *support* to use this knowledge as well as their own professional judgement to respond to students, to provide care and create safe, inclusive learning environments for our students.

I share this because these two components, trust and support, are also the key factors that have allowed me to make space for my students and create inclusive experiences in their *music* education – and these are under threat with the current direction of the curriculum reform. I've been granted trust from the current NSW syllabus documents, which provide the flexibility and agency necessary for me to use my skills as a professional musician and teacher to listen and respond to the students in front of me. I get to work *with* my incredible students who bring a wealth of cultural, social and musical experiences, knowledges, skills, values and goals. Together, we have developed inclusive and culturally relevant programs where students engage in music

as social and cultural practices. Students are met where they are, and guided to where they want to go, with detours and learning along the way. They have the space and resources to grow musically and socially through experiencing, practicing and making music in a variety of contexts. As an example, earlier this year, we collaborated with local Elders to explore First Nations cultures and current issues, using these yarns, recordings and the NAIDOC theme as a basis to write a song as a class. This process created the space for increased cultural safety for students to share their experiences and views, learning more about and from each other, while exploring, sharing and creating music important to them.

In the current system, I am allowed to internally assess my students using contextually relevant and inclusive modes, where they can meaningfully and accurately share their knowledges and skills. I can assess students through their embodied understanding of music (through the way they play and create music), and their knowledge about music, and I can choose the most appropriate way to do this. I've witnessed my students excel in many different ways, whether it be scripting and recording a podcast episode related to their performance of an Egyptian pop song, or yarning about their didgeridoo playing. In these contexts, they develop their knowledges and skills, and are then assessed, in a way that's culturally and contextually relevant. It values multiple forms of music making and thinking about music, preparing them for the plurality and diversity of music making outside the school context, while also valuing the plurality and diversity of students' own musical experiences and identities.

In a school where significant value is placed on music, I am provided with substantial support in terms of resources and time to help students overcome barriers to access meaningful musical experiences. Students have access to facilities in their Music classes to learn music production, compose film music, play and write songs in a rock or pop band, or play folk music in a string ensemble that also collaborates with our RnB musicians. In this space, these musics are valued equally and are accessible to all students, who have choice. Given this choice and space, students discover new musics, ways of music making, and even new parts of themselves. Importantly, this ability to foster opportunities for a range of practical musicing is also supported by the current syllabus (particularly its focus on "the integration of learning experiences" (p. 10) so that "all students have the opportunity to develop their musical abilities and potential" and "continue learning in formal and informal music settings after school" (p. 6)), and has allowed more students to overcome barriers to access transformational musical experiences in school. This is essential in lower ICSEA contexts, where students have limited access to resources, or experience other barriers to learning music outside the classroom (e.g. disability, low self-efficacy and confidence, finance for tuition, time, stable home/learning environments).

Creating meaningful and inclusive classroom music education is clearly valuable, and in practice is dependent on support for and trust in the music teacher, and space for the student. Disappointingly, the recently released draft syllabi take away both of these key elements. In the proposed draft syllabi, teachers and students are restricted in their agency. Teachers are restricted in their ability to respond to the needs, abilities and strengths of their students. Students are restricted from accessing the course in a

meaningful way, and only a limited number and type of students will be able to demonstrate their musical skills, knowledges and understandings. Teachers and students will lack choice in what musics can be studied, and restrictions on performance will limit students' ability to participate in diverse and relevant musical practices. The focus on writing about music, along with the devaluing of creating and composing music in both internal and external assessment, favours and validates limited forms of knowledge and is not reflective of musical practices and cultures outside the classroom. Currently, students in Stage 6 are afforded opportunities to choose musics and contexts (through topics), as well as ways of engaging with these (i.e. through performances, compositions or viva voces). This choice in their study and assessment mirrors musical practice outside the classroom, providing relevant learning experiences and allowing a greater variety of students to succeed.

This is not to say that the current syllabus is perfect for our current context, 15 years after it was written. While it contains key elements, like student choice and agency, and an underlying philosophy of inclusivity, there is plenty of room for an update to reflect new understandings; including those to do with cultural diversity, sensitivity and protocols, pluralities of musics and literacies, and the significant impacts of digital technology on music making and learning. In doing so, we can take a step forward, and ensure the course is accessible and relevant, with opportunities for meaningful assessment that fosters lifelong learning. Particularly, this needs to ensure that students are allowed, even encouraged, to perform, create, and talk about music in culturally and contextually appropriate ways that nurtures the development of students' voices (e.g. submitting a recording for a composition rather than a notated score, being marked for performances and compositions within contextually relevant frameworks, using language and literacies relevant to the musical cultures being studied).

With the highest numbers of enrolment in senior Music courses in Australia, there are many stakeholders of the Stage 6 Syllabus in NSW. Young people, teachers, parents, artists, and the Australian music industry as a whole, are all impacted by the music education system in NSW – they benefit when it is strong, and they suffer when it is weak. These are the people that should be consulted in the process of curriculum reform. We have an important opportunity for NSW to once again lead music education internationally, as we have before. To do this, we need to include the voices of experts and stakeholders in a process that is transparent and thorough. We need the consultation process to be public, and the process of translating this consultation into a syllabus to be clearly justified and reflective of the needs of the stakeholders.

This is an important opportunity that we can't afford to miss, especially if this will dictate the future of NSW music education for many years to come.

Thank you for considering my submission.

With warm wishes,

Caitlin Sandiford

Classroom Music Teacher, Musician, Research Student and Casual Academic