

Submission  
No 121

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

**Name:** Alex Hone  
**Date Received:** 21 November 2024

---

## **Inquiry into arts and music education and training in New South Wales**

*Submission regarding NSW curriculum reform and NESA's consultation process for the arts and music syllabuses reviews*

*Written by Alex Hone, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2024*

To the Joint Select Committee,

Thank you for extending the duration of this inquiry to consider NSW curriculum reform as part of the wider inquiry into arts and music education and training in New South Wales. I'm writing to express significant concerns about the proposed Music syllabus changes and the impact that they will have on music education and training across our state. In particular, I'm very concerned about high school students and the potential for large numbers of these students to discontinue music in Year 11 and 12 because of poor syllabus design and a lack of consultation. These changes could result in significant downstream effects, such as a reduction in the number of students pursuing tertiary music studies or careers in the music industry.

To provide some personal context for this submission, I'm a music educator working in Sydney, currently teaching high school music. Throughout my career, I have taught pre-school, primary and high school music, including Music 1 and Music 2, two of the HSC courses currently under review. I've also lectured in the tertiary sector, helping to train the next generation of music teachers.

As a music teacher I have had the privilege to witness the pure and unfiltered joy of 3-year-olds singing and dancing to music with the same ease and comfort as running and jumping. I've seen primary students develop confidence in themselves as they sing publicly for the first time, while others create their own original songs that bind their friendship groups together and create a shared sense of identity. I've witnessed how the music department can be a refuge for anxious teenagers who are still working out who they are and what their place in the world will be as young adults. I've seen these same teenagers form their own bands, moving from nervously rehearsing after school to playing public shows and going on tour. I've seen high school students work tirelessly to master the craft of musical performance or composition, undertaking performances and writing original pieces that possess startling quality and depth. I've also seen pre-service music teachers at university find their passion and calling in life as educators, with the deep love for music and people that will sustain them professionally and personally for decades to come.

There are an extremely broad array of music education experiences that take place in New South Wales, many of which have been discussed in other submissions to this inquiry. In this submission I'd like to focus on the HSC Music syllabuses, briefly sketching the current range of syllabuses before discussing the grave problems with the proposed new syllabuses and the process surrounding the syllabus changes.

## Current HSC Music Syllabuses

There are currently four HSC Music syllabuses in operation:

- Music Life Skills
- Music 1
- Music 2
- Music Extension

Table 1 lists the number of students undertaking each subject in the last five years (with the table collated using data from this [NSW government website](#)).

*Table 1: HSC Music Course Candidature 2020-2024*

Course	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
Life Skills	186	170	178	155	155
Music 1	4600	4417	4326	4750	4552
Music 2	662	727	686	712	688
Music Extension	391	389	357	383	400

Table 1 clearly shows that Music 1 is the most popular course, with approximately 4500 enrolled annually, representing around 6% of the state's HSC students. This 2-unit course is very flexible both in its content and assessment, which is one major reason that it is so popular. Students can undertake this course if they have a passion for any style or genre of music, they can play any instrument or sing for their performances, and they can choose whether to focus on composition, performance, musicology or a combination of all of these for their external HSC assessment. The only mandatory assessment components are one performance and a one-hour written paper. Music 1 teachers also have a considerable amount of flexibility when choosing their content topics, enabling them to tailor the course to the needs and interests of their students.

Music 1 is the subject most likely to be offered in high schools with smaller candidatures, especially in regional and rural areas, because it can draw in musicians from any genre or level of experience. Although it is often perceived as the 'pop' course, many classical musicians also study Music 1, either to pursue their specific interests or because their school does not offer Music 2. This makes the Music 1 course the essential pillar of HSC music study in diverse, regional and disadvantaged communities.

Music 2 is undertaken by around 700 students per year, less than 1% of the state. This is a much less flexible 2-unit course, designed primarily for classically trained students with many years of experience in reading and analysing musical scores and performing highly technical repertoire in a specific style. Despite the focus on classical music, course still offers choices about topic areas for study, and for external HSC assessment the only mandatory components are one performance, one composition and one written exam. Students can then choose whether to complete two additional performances, one additional composition, or one musicology essay as their elective component of external examination.

Music Extension is a 1-unit course that can only be taken in Year 12 by Music 2 students. This enables students to focus further on their desired area of speciality. Around 50-60% of

Music 2 students elect to study Music Extension, making it a very popular choice for Music 2 students. In the current syllabuses, students choose from the areas of performance, composition or musicology. They then complete all internal and external assessments in this area, allowing greater specialisation on their chosen musical path.

In total, around 7% of New South Wales students choose to study one of the four HSC Music courses. This is twice the rate of any other state in the country, a fact noted in a [recent scathing review](#) of the proposed syllabus changes by Dr. James Humberstone, senior music education lecturer at the Sydney Conservatorium and Dr. Jennifer Carter, the leading expert in music syllabus development in NSW.

### Proposed HSC Music Syllabus Changes

On Monday 28 October, NESA released [draft syllabuses](#) for the four HSC Music courses. While there are significant issues with the draft Music 1, Music 2 and Music Extension syllabuses, the proposed changes to the Music 1 course are so extensive that the course is no longer recognisable as a suitable path of study for many students. Table 2 presents a summary of some of the major proposed changes:

*Table 2: Comparison between current Music 1 syllabus and new proposed syllabus*

	<b>Current Syllabus</b>	<b>New Proposed Syllabus</b>
<b>Content</b>	- Large amount of free choice in topic areas	- 7 mandated topics, including popular music, Western art music, methods of improvisation and comparisons and connections - No free choice or options for any topics
<b>Learning experiences</b>	- Focus on the integration of performing, listening and composing	- Heavy focus on written knowledge <i>about</i> music at the expense of composition and performance - No discussion of focus area integration
<b>HSC assessment</b>	- 50 mandatory marks: - 1 hour written paper (30 marks) - 1 performance (20 marks) - 60 marks of electives: - 3 electives, with a choice of any combination of performances, compositions or viva voces	- 100 mandatory marks: - 2 hour written paper (50 marks) - 2 performances (50 marks) - No electives; no opportunity to submit a composition or viva voce for external assessment
<b>Performance requirements</b>	- Free choice of style/genre for all performances - Any number of accompanists or students can play solo	- One performance piece must be in a pop style - Maximum of 3 accompanists

The changes to Music 1 represent a major attack on many of the core features of this course that make it so successful. To give a few examples of how this course will fail to meet the needs of students:

- Students who DJ or play heavy metal will be compelled to study topics that are unlikely to align with their interests and teachers will have no ability to adapt topics
- Whereas contemporary music research focuses on integrating performing, composing and listening as musical experiences, the new syllabus heavily emphasises written knowledge *about* music over embodied knowledge through performing music or the creation of original ideas through composition
- Many students who study Music 1 show skill and passion in composition. Under the proposed changes, they will not be able to include any compositions as part of their external assessment, instead being mandated to focus exclusively on writing and performance
- Students who play classical music or global music instruments (e.g. tabla or erhu) will be required to perform a pop song, which will account for 50% of their performance grade. This means that a student who has potentially spent 10 years or more studying one musical tradition will have to jettison this to quickly learn to play in a completely different style.

As stated previously, for many students around the state, particularly in regional and rural areas, their only option to study music at the HSC is through the Music 1 course. Staffing challenges and class size requirements from school principals also mean that these courses will only run with sufficient numbers. As a result of the proposed changes, it is likely that Music will no longer be offered in many regional and rural schools, as some students will not choose Music because they do not have the ability to focus on areas of the course that align with their strengths. Budding composers and musicologists won't choose Music if they aren't confident as performers, while some strong performers who struggle with music theory won't choose Music when they see that the written exam has a 50% weighting for their external Music mark.

More broadly, the Music 1 syllabus draft displays a profound misunderstanding of the nature of music and musical knowledge that carries into the other syllabus drafts as well. No matter how often teachers and educationalists use the rhetoric of creating "lifelong learners", HSC students are highly motivated by success in assessments and teachers want their students to succeed. By weighting the external HSC Music 1 assessment as 50% written paper and 50% performance, the proposed syllabus is making a profoundly misguided statement about the extent to which writing *about* music under time pressure represents the pinnacle of musical knowledge or skill. To once again consider a large proportion of the Music 1 candidature (students who love to perform or compose or talk about music but do not see themselves as music theory experts) these students will look at the Music 1 assessment weightings and decide that they must not be real musicians because they will struggle in a written exam. This then leaves many students in Stage 5 who are conscious of their HSC pathway in a position of not choosing music in Year 9, unless they want to do music "for fun" before taking their serious subjects in Stage 6.

There are similar issues with the Music 2 and Music Extension syllabuses, which I would be happy to expand upon, but for the sake of clarity and brevity I've focused here on the Music

1 syllabus as the current draft will have the largest immediate result of reducing student participation in HSC music.

### **NESA's Syllabus Writing and Consultation Process**

As a music teacher working with HSC students, I have a close-up view of their goals, interests and needs. I'm also mindful of their prior learning in Stages 4-5 and their possible career pathways. Similarly, music teachers across New South Wales are highly trained experts who share a strong desire for their students to succeed in the musical pursuits that will enable them to flourish as people. It is therefore crucial that the HSC syllabuses reflect the needs of these students.

The release of the draft syllabuses has brought about a crisis of confidence in NESA's ability to understand student needs and develop syllabuses that support student success. In the past few weeks, thousands of music teachers have convened in forums such as [ASME](#) meetings, [AIS](#) consultations, Department of Education Creative Arts meetings, and various online spaces. Over 30 academics and music education experts [signed a letter](#) decrying the proposed changes and calling for an immediate suspension of the draft review process. There is almost unanimous agreement amongst New South Wales music teachers that the new syllabuses not only do not meet the standards of the current syllabus, but that in their present form they will be deeply detrimental to music education in New South Wales as a whole.

NESA have claimed that the new syllabuses have been created in response to the [Masters Curriculum Review](#) and the [2024 AERO report](#) about a knowledge rich approach to curriculum design. The [NSW Government response](#) to the Masters review identified a number of key focus areas, including building strong foundations for future learning, strengthening post-school pathways and identifying essential knowledge. As [this document](#) – created by another NSW music teacher – summarises, the new HSC syllabuses do not adequately reflect the stated goals and priorities of any of the three aforementioned reports and responses, in many cases moving in the opposite direction. If NESA cannot write syllabuses that align with their own stated curriculum goals, it seems very unlikely that they can also consider the needs of music students and teachers across all of New South Wales.

One final area to consider is that NESA have couched an increased focus on test-based written knowledge about music as providing "rigour" to the courses. Rigour is indeed an important factor to consider in the design of HSC music courses, but the assumption embedded in the new syllabuses is that rigour specifically means the ability to recall facts and theoretical concepts about music when encountering unfamiliar repertoire in exam situations. As discussed earlier, this is an extremely limited and reductive vision of musical knowledge and rigour, one that does not account for the incredible rigour of solo and ensemble performance in many styles of music, or the rigour involved in creating and composing new pieces.

To use one example of this, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra performs incredibly challenging pieces of music, requiring individuals to spend hours rehearsing and practising their parts even when they have reached a professional standard. These musicians demonstrate musical knowledge through the embodied act of playing, which could be called procedural

knowledge. This music is indeed extremely rigorous, but a written exam about music would not capture the rigour of orchestral performance in any meaningful way. Indeed, it would also seem redundant to question whether Sydney Symphony Orchestra musicians have rigorous musical knowledge because the act of performing is a demonstration of this knowledge and skill. Thus, although rigour is important in music syllabuses, limiting the definition of rigour to written knowledge has extremely deleterious impacts on the syllabuses and the resultant music classrooms that will be shaped by these documents.

NESA have offered a consultation period from October 28 to December 20 where teachers can complete a [survey](#) giving feedback on the proposed changes. This survey is deeply inadequate as a method of providing substantive feedback, allowing a maximum of only 600 words of written submissions per HSC course in addition to several quantitative questions. Teachers have also been informed that they can write individual submissions to NESA, but there is no requirement for NESA to act upon the advice they receive or to demonstrate that they have understood the feedback and will make the necessary changes to allow the syllabuses to be functional, let alone nationally leading.

It is possible that NESA's insufficient transparency and accountability to teachers may serve important but undisclosed political objectives, and the current Creative arts syllabus review process is consistent with other subjects that have recently undergone syllabus updates. Unfortunately, the release of the current draft syllabuses makes it clear that NESA cannot be trusted to produce high quality Music teaching documents on their own. Without a complete upending of the current process, it is possible and even likely that within 10 years, New South Wales will have the same number of HSC music students as other states, destroying our position of leadership in arts and music education, while paving the way for further destructive syllabuses in other states as they follow our approach.

### **Conclusion**

With such deep issues in the current Music syllabuses and the manner in which they have been released and reviewed, these syllabuses should be scrapped entirely. A new process should begin in its place, one that brings transparency to the syllabus writing process and consults with experts and music teachers in metropolitan, regional and rural areas. A [petition](#) to Parliament has been launched, generating over 4000 signatures in less than a week. I sincerely believe that with meaningful collaboration among all key stakeholders, new HSC Music syllabuses can be developed to support the flourishing of students across New South Wales for generations to come.