

Submission
No 125

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

Organisation: Drama NSW
Date Received: 24 November 2024



DRAMA NEW SOUTH WALES

Formal Submission from Drama NSW to the Inquiry on the Draft Year 11 and 12 Drama Syllabus, Draft Year 11 and 12 Drama Life Skills Syllabus and Draft Assessment and Examination Requirements

Introduction and Context

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to address the ongoing crisis in Arts Education and Training in NSW. Regrettably, we report that the current state of performing arts education has significantly worsened since our last meeting. NESA's recently released and poorly-conceived draft senior Drama syllabuses undermine teacher expertise, disregard feedback, and restrict the rich learning experiences and authentic assessments that have been hallmarks of NSW Drama education for over 30 years.

The proposed changes to the NSW Year 11 and 12 Drama syllabus diminish the experiential aspects of the HSC examination, reducing opportunities for diverse learners and jeopardising equitable access to Arts Education as students transition into adulthood and potential arts careers. The current syllabus, globally recognised as a world-class curriculum, integrates authentic approaches to learning and assessment that foster creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration—skills essential for future success. Longstanding research and scholarship consistently highlight the critical importance of student-devised drama, or playbuilding, as a core element of the NSW Drama curriculum from K-12, including the current group performance examination requirements in Stage 6. Playbuilding, in particular, offers students the opportunity to devise original dramas for real audiences, allowing them to engage in the Performing Arts in meaningful and creative ways. For teachers, it provides an authentic, discipline-based approach to teaching and assessment, strengthened further by the 'live' aspect of HSC performance examinations. These real-world opportunities enable students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge as student artists in sophisticated and creative ways, further reinforcing the value of key components of the existing syllabus. By removing the external assessment of the ensemble process, the proposed changes send a clear signal that this vital aspect of collaboration and creative practice is no longer considered important, undermining its significance in Drama education. (See Duffy, Sallis, & Hatton, 2025, in press; Hatton, 2004, 2005, 2007; Hatton & Lovesy, 2009, 2015; Jacobs, 2014; Simons, 1997, 2004; Tarlington & Michaels, 1995; Walsh & Hatton, 2023)

Drama NSW rejects the draft Year 11 and 12 Drama syllabus, the draft Year 11 and 12 Drama Life Skills syllabus, and the accompanying draft Assessment and Examination Requirements; we also wish to emphasise our concern over the inadequate consultation process underpinning their development. We request that the committee urge NESA to reject the draft Year 11 and 12 Drama syllabuses and reinstate the syllabus writing process, ensuring the incorporation of teacher and student voices and drawing on the expertise of leading researchers in Drama education.

Key Concerns

- Impact on Learning and Progression
 - The proposed draft disrupts continuity in Drama education, limits meaningful engagement with the art form, and fails to meet contemporary educational and industry standards.
 - By narrowing creative and collaborative opportunities, it undermines critical skills like communication, empathy, problem-solving, and innovation, which are essential for industries prioritising human interaction and adaptability.

- Removal of Collaborative and Creative Assessment and Examination
 - The draft assessment and examination requirements eliminate the Group Performance (GP), an authentic, collaborative assessment that has long been a cornerstone of the HSC Drama syllabus. This removal from the external examination, alongside the absence of any compulsory performance element in the external examination, significantly devalues the practical learning that is an essential feature of Drama education.
 - Student voice data, collected by the Drama NSW committee, demonstrates overwhelming support for the GP, with 90.9% of 754 students reporting a positive or very positive experience. Their comments repeatedly highlight teamwork skills, creative and collaborative problem-solving, and a rewarding sense of achievement from performing the finished product as significant benefits of the GP experience. Removing this assessment diminishes creativity, critical thinking and inclusivity in the assessment process.
 - Live performance assessment by external assessors significantly enhances the quality of student work, as it fosters high standards and aligns with real-world practices in drama and the arts.
 - The syllabus states, "Examination questions may require students to integrate knowledge, understanding, and skills developed through studying the course" (p7). However, it is unclear how students will integrate performance skills into the exam when the entire external examination is written. ('Performing' is

one of the 3 focus areas of the syllabus and accounts for a full third of the course's indicative hours.)

- Assessing the ensemble performance based on a written response (p7) is problematic. An excellent writer could fabricate a response without having meaningfully contributed to the work, making this form of assessment unreliable and invalid.
 - The allowance for an internally assessed ensemble performance to be either scripted or devised further devalues the creative process of Making, as these two approaches require vastly different levels of creativity, originality, and collaboration. This lack of distinction undermines the experiential learning that is central to Drama education and diminishes the emphasis on the essential skills developed through devising original works.
 - We express concern about the reduction of the importance of Making outcomes in the new syllabus, evident in the assessment weighting for Making being reduced from 40% to 35%.
 - There is a risk of the internally assessed ensemble performance being devalued to as little as 10% of internal assessment if the draft Assessment and Examination Requirements are adopted.
 - We express concern about the discrepancy between internal assessment weightings (70% Making & Performing / 30% Critically Reflecting) and the HSC weightings (50% Written Paper / 50% Individual Project).
 - Invoking "industry practice" to justify other changes to Individual Projects while removing the director's folio option is inconsistent, as the role of the director remains fundamental in industry.
 - The claim that electronic submission of costume and set designs reflects industry practice (p9) is inaccurate.
 - Digitally submitted photographs of designs, particularly for sets, fail to capture the full scope and detail of the projects in the same way as physical submissions, undermining the authenticity of the assessment process.
- Reduced Accessibility and Equity
 - The increased emphasis on written components in the external exam disproportionately benefits academically inclined students and strong writers, while disadvantaging those who have traditionally thrived in Drama due to its emphasis on practical and creative expression. This is especially concerning for students who face challenges with written communication, such as those with dyslexia. For years, Drama has offered alternative avenues for these students to express themselves and achieve exam success; however, the proposed draft syllabus significantly reduces these opportunities, limiting inclusivity and accessibility.

- The lack of detail supplied by NESAs regarding the online submission of the Individual Project is vague and inconsistent. We decline to wait for the details of the uploading process to be included in the support document for information. Additionally, the creation of this work in electronic form is not accepted industry practice, contrary to what is suggested in the draft Assessment and Examination Requirements.
 - The reduction of Individual Project options diminishes student choice and the opportunities for effective differentiation that come with the current range of options.
 - The removal of Video Drama as an Individual Project option particularly impacts students in rural areas or with financial constraints, who may not have ready access to live theatre.
 - It is contradictory for 'short film' to remain an option for the Life Skills Drama project when it has been removed from the mainstream Individual Project options (p22 of draft Year 11 and 12 Drama Life Skills syllabus).
 - The removal of the Director's Folio and Research options particularly impacts rural and regional students who may wish to submit a written project but are unable to review live theatre and complete the Portfolio of Theatre Criticism or Research option.
 - The removal of the Director's Folio option disadvantages gifted and talented students who may wish to work at a higher conceptual level.
 - Requiring digital submission of projects may disadvantage students who lack access to the software and technology needed to create and present their work in a digital format, further exacerbating inequities.
- Misalignment with Existing Frameworks
 - The draft syllabus lacks alignment with the Year 7-10 Drama syllabus, creating a disjointed learning pathway through Stages 4 and 5 into Stage 6.
 - Content points are vague and inconsistent, offering little practical guidance for teachers and risking inconsistent delivery across schools.
 - The inconsistent phrasing of content points, with some including clear directive verbs and others lacking these, diminishes clarity for teachers in determining exactly what they are expected to teach and what knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate.
 - Some language used in the Life Skills outcomes is inconsistent with the expected skill levels for Life Skills students, such as requiring higher-order thinking ("...experiments with ideas for dramatic works or experiences" - p15). Other phrasing does not align with the content area it represents (e.g., "recognises dramatic forms or styles" being categorised under 'Making' - p15).

- The rationale and aim of the Life Skills syllabus do not reflect the unique needs of students with intellectual disabilities. Instead, they merely replicate the rationale and aim from the mainstream draft syllabus without any adjustments.
- Exclusion of Diverse and Inclusive Voices
 - The inclusion of only one prescribed text for both *Australian drama and theatre* and *International dramatic forms and styles* in Year 12, while supporting First Nations representation, excludes other diverse voices, undermining the syllabus' goals of inclusivity.
- Misuse of Research Evidence and Lack of Expertise:
 - We have serious concerns about the evidence base NESA has used to justify its proposed changes. There is no research that supports the reduction in quality of teaching practice, curriculum content, or assessment processes, as outlined in the draft syllabus and assessment document.
 - NESA's use of research findings to support the proposed changes raises concerns about whether these studies have been fully or appropriately represented. Academic research, as the work of experts in the field, should be applied with integrity and care, ensuring it aligns with the original intent and is not selectively interpreted.
 - The evidence base cited in the draft Life Skills 11-12 syllabus is identical to that of the mainstream 11-12 syllabus. It does not include research addressing the specific needs of students who will study the Life Skills course.
- Flawed Consultation Process
 - The consultation period was poorly timed, coinciding with educators' busiest period, and lacked transparency and responsiveness.
 - The curriculum reform priority to "draw on the expertise of teachers to ensure the review's outcomes continue to support their important work" has not been fulfilled. If this priority had been genuinely addressed, there would not be such widespread disdain and dissatisfaction across the Drama education community. The lack of meaningful consultation and engagement with educators undermines the credibility of the proposed changes and the trust of those tasked with delivering them.
 - There are concerns that feedback from Drama NSW and other stakeholders has not been meaningfully addressed or integrated. Drama NSW remains concerned that the lack of transparency in the process will continue to impact

the feedback process and ultimately result in a syllabus that does not serve the best interests of students and teachers.

- The bipartisan motion by Shadow Minister Sarah Mitchell to call for documents regarding the Creative Arts Year 11-12 draft syllabuses highlights significant concerns about the transparency of NESA's development process, including a disconnect between teacher input and the drafts released for consultation.

- Impact on Future Generations:
 - The proposed changes pose significant risks for future generations of students, artists, and pre-service teachers, potentially reducing opportunities and diminishing the quality of education in the performing arts.
 - By narrowing creative and collaborative learning pathways, the syllabus undermines the transferable skills—such as communication, creativity, problem-solving, and innovation—that are critical for success in a rapidly changing world where automation increasingly replaces technical skills.

Recommendations

Drama NSW urges the Committee to recommend that NESA:

1. Extend the Consultation Period
 - Extend the "Have Your Say" period to allow meaningful contributions from all stakeholders, including teachers, students, researchers, and industry professionals.

2. Rewrite the Draft Year 11 and 12 Drama Syllabus, the draft Year 11 and 12 Drama Life Skills Syllabus, and the accompanying draft Assessment and Examination requirements
 - Develop a new draft that retains the rigour and quality of the existing syllabus, aligns with international evidence-based practices, and reflects the voices of teachers, students, and researchers.
 - Ensure that there is a second 'have your say' period to consult on the rewrite.

3. Review the Approach to Assessment and Examination
 - Reintroduce the Group Performance in a meaningful form and reinstate the diverse Individual Project options to ensure the assessment process accommodates all learners, while exploring innovative ways to provide additional support for teachers in delivering these complex and high-quality assessments.

- This includes restoring Video Drama, Director’s Folio, Lighting Design and the Applied Research Project to maintain pathways for conceptual and creative thinking.
4. Ensure Equity and Accessibility
 - Prioritise assessments that accommodate neurodiverse learners, EALD students, and those in rural and remote areas, recognising the value of practical and collaborative outputs over an overemphasis on written work.
 5. Embed Authentic Learning and Diversity
 - Reinstate the removed second texts from *Australian Drama and Theatre* to ensure rigour and reflect the breadth of Australia’s cultural and social diversity, enabling students to engage with a wide range of voices.

Conclusion

By continuing to prioritise the arts, this inquiry can deliver profound, lasting benefits for arts educators and students in NSW, safeguarding the state’s cultural fabric and equipping young people with essential skills for the future.

As it stands, the draft syllabus poses risks not only for students and teachers but also for the broader education and cultural sectors. The proposed changes threaten pathways into tertiary education and the training of future artists and arts leaders.

We call on the Committee to advocate for a rigorous, inclusive, and best-practice Stage 6 Drama syllabus that preserves collaborative and performance-based assessments. Your leadership can ensure that the arts remain a vital part of NSW’s education system, empowering the next generation to thrive.

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