

**Submission
No 119**

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

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

Thankyou for the invitation to make a submission to the Inquiry. We understand that this submission is made in response to the draft HSC Music Syllabi recently released by NESA.

We are both signatories on the recent [letter from 31 of Australia's leading academics to Minister Prue Car](#) asking her to have NESA withdraw the draft HSC Music Syllabi and restart the process once this Parliamentary Inquiry hands down its findings and recommendations. The restart should be done with a new and transparent process. We also fully support the current [petition to parliament](#).

There are fundamental structural flaws in the proposed syllabi that do not reflect the research evidence base in music education. In Music 1, this is the 50% written exam, the narrow focus areas, and the removal of elective options for assessment. These issues necessitate the removal of the draft syllabi and restarting of the process. It is not possible to adequately address the deficiencies with an additional round of consultation as this will not lead to the level of change required to develop a world-leading, future-focussed HSC Music 1, Music 2 and Music Extension.

Introduction

We are music teacher educators in Initial Teacher Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. We are both experienced school music teachers with many years of teaching in Victoria and the UK (Emily) and NSW in public and independent schools (Brad). We have both published widely in leading international and national journals and presented at international conferences. In addition, we both hold leadership positions in national and international music education organisations. Currently, Emily is the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME) National Secretary and Brad is a Board Member for the International Society for Music Education (ISME) and a past ASME National President. We both have significant music curriculum expertise in NSW (Brad) and Victoria (both). Our institutional Find an Expert pages provide further detail of our expertise. See [Dr Emily Wilson](#) and [Dr Brad Merrick](#)

For 40 years, NSW has led nationally with an inclusive senior secondary curriculum and the highest number of Year 12 music enrolments. The NSW Syllabus is the envy of music teachers across Australia. For everyone who believes in music-for-everyone and access to lifelong engagement in music making as a participant, the statistics speak for themselves. In NSW, 7% of Year 12 students do music, whereas, in Victoria it's 4% and the Victorian situation is replicated across other states.

As the recent blog published by our colleagues Dr James Humberstone and Dr Jennifer Carter in [AARE EduResearch Matters](#) states:

The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) curriculum review puts music courses at risk, not just in NSW, but across Australia. NSW has twice the number of students taking music than any other state. That makes it a leader. The proposed changes fall short of research, best practice, and teacher expectations.

As NSW is the biggest education system, changes to the NSW HSC Music Syllabi will impact nationally, every student and music teacher in Australia is a stakeholder.

In our submission we will focus on Music 1 as this is the course with 85% of music enrolments in NSW, making it the most significant senior secondary music subject nationally. The main areas we will address in our submission are the written exam and reduction of student choice.

Music 1 Written Examination

“It’s music and we came to play instruments” is the title of Emily’s PhD thesis and a quote from a Year 10 student. After all, students are the primary stakeholders in any curricula and when they are asked why they have chosen school music, the answer is almost always about practical music making. Students are very clear about why they want to do school music and this provides strong guidance for curriculum development. Likewise, all music teachers were school students once, and we also love music because we love doing music as performers, creators and listeners. This is hands on, practical, active, experiential learning in and through music, not learning about music.

The proposed 2-hour written examination in Music 1 worth 50% of the final grade (up from 25%) is a hugely backwards step that will result in the decimation of senior secondary music enrolments in NSW with implications nationally.

In Victoria, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) undertook a once-in-a-generation review of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Music Study Design in 2020-2021. The new VCE Music Study Design was first taught in 2023.

Analysis of the [VCE Music Study Design](#) and existing NSW HSC Music Syllabi reveals that Victoria moved closer to the HSC, introducing a new course, “Music Inquiry”, modelled on Music 1. Music Inquiry is explicitly positioned as music-for-everyone using a project-based learning approach to external assessment, reflecting authentic assessment practices and maximising student choice. In the final external assessment task (EAT), worth 50% of the final grade, students design their own project and can choose to perform, create, or a mixture of both. There is an external aural and written exam which is 1-hour long and worth 15% of students’ final score. The remaining assessment is school-based coursework. There is no requirement for students to have individual instrument lessons and students who are beginners in Year 11 can successfully complete Music Inquiry.

The strength of the current Music 1 syllabus is its inclusive nature and the student choice that it offers. However, it has not been reviewed for a very long time and needs an update to re-align itself not only with best-practice internationally, but to be world-leading. In particular, the requirement that mandates music notation for composition is obsolete with the advent of low- and no-cost Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) to create and record music.

Music 1 is accessible and inclusive for all students, not just those who have been having private instrumental lessons for many years. Students who have completed Music 1 still go onto tertiary music study and there are many examples of professional musicians having completed Music 1. See below for testimonials.

Music 1 is also a pathway to becoming a secondary school music teacher. In our Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne, in the Master of Teaching which is our Initial Teacher Education course, we regularly admit students into the Music Learning Areas who have completed Music 1. These students successfully complete our course, become registered teachers in Victoria, and go onto become graduate secondary school music teachers.

Teaching music musically ([Swanwick, 2012](#)) extends to authentic assessment or assessing music musically and the importance of this cannot be overstated. Much is written in music education research about poorly conceived summative assessments that result in “assessment backwash” ([Fautley & Colwell, 2012](#)). The unintended consequences of which then negatively impact learning and teaching practices. A 50% final written exam would result in at least 50% of class time being given over to written work, this is highly unmusical.

In the previous Victorian VCE Music Study Design, teachers reported spending up to 80% of class time on the theoretical music knowledge required for the final written examination. This was due to the amount of content that had to be taught and the weighting of the examination. Students must also develop the aural skills to apply this content in an Aural and Written examination. The new VCE Music Study Design has significantly reduced both the amount of content and the length (1 hour instead of 90 minutes) and weighting (20%) of the final written exam with the specific goal of increasing student enrolments through a more accessible and inclusive Music Study Design.

As well as teachers allocating enormous amounts of class time to prepare students for final written examinations in music, one example of assessment backwash that is widespread is separating music learning and teaching into “theory” and “prac” classes. Despite music education research since the 1970s demonstrating the efficacy of integration, this practice of separation is still widespread. Instead of teaching conceptual musical knowledge in a musical context through integrated performing, composing and listening, teachers frequently adopt “drill and practice” approaches to embed content. This is not only disengaging for students but does not optimise musical learning.

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture”, a quote with unknown origins is often cited ([Brackett, 2000](#)). A 50% written examination has no basis in professional music practice. A written exam of this length and weighting would sever any meaningful connection with tertiary music options, the music industry, and lifelong engagement in active music making as an amateur, all of which involve hands on, practical, experiential music making.

The English literacy requirements of a long written Music examination present barriers to access and inclusion to certain groups of students who are already disadvantaged. For example, EAL students, neurodiverse students, and students with low-levels of literacy due to a range of circumstances.

Along written examination in music disregards Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing ([Martin, 2003](#)) and teaching using Indigenous relational worldviews ([Coff, 2021](#)) which are recognised as supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to thrive at school. Curricula have a role to play here. Simply adding Indigenous perspectives or content does little to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ([Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2022](#)). Instead, the music curriculum should reflect current Indigenous-authored research evidence to support Indigenous students which includes culturally responsive pedagogies ([Rigney, 2023](#)) and a strengths-based approach ([Stronger Smarter Institute, 2017](#)).

Importance of choice

The importance of student choice supporting student engagement and motivation cannot be overstated. In Victoria, the recently reviewed VCE Music Study Design built in

greater student choice across all subjects. In Music Inquiry, students complete a project designed by them and choose whether to perform, create or a combination of both. In Music Contemporary Performance students can play their own compositions, perform solo, play multiple instruments, and/or perform as an ensemble. The only mandatory requirements in Music Contemporary Performance are that students play a reimagined work, a post-1990 Australian work (which can be their own composition), and an ensemble. The final performance exam in this specialist performance subject is a 20-minute practical examination worth 50% and a 1-hour examination worth 20%. There are no focus areas and no specified musical genres or styles in any of the VCE music subjects. The new VCE Music Study Design 2023-2027 reflects current music education research into student engagement, informal learning and culturally responsive pedagogies.

Brad has taught in various roles in three different school settings, State, Catholic and Independent setting, he has watched the incredible growth of students who found their niche and entered a world that allowed them to have agency, choice, and find motivation in the act of creating, expressing and performing, both individually and collectively, whether in a jazz quintet, a heavy metal band, a concert band, choir, or chamber ensemble, of a self-composed work.

The ability for students and teachers to find genres and topics in the current Music 1 that allow them to really delve into areas of interest rather than being told what to do is a great strength. Brad investigated student motivation for his PhD, he found that it was amazing how choice, success and enjoyment lead to achievement. This is reflected in the large numbers of students choosing Music 1 over many years, and more importantly the many success stories that have emerged. All the existing HSC music courses can be studied by musicians of all backgrounds and interests, allowing for equity, access and differentiation. The inclusion of Performance, Aural, Composition, and Musicology (Essays in Music 2, Extension) and the Viva Voce in Music 1 assessment has meant that the students who loved music could share stories and understanding about things they were curious and passionate about, and these were just as valued and important in the music class as the composer writing songs, to the performer preparing between 4-6 pieces for their HSC program.

The common thread through all the current HSC music syllabi is the highly practical and engaging design of the subjects and the way these inspire students, giving them real life preparation for the music industry. It's not always the best student, rather those who develop skills and are committed over time, who develop and work hard to achieve that benefit. That's why 'choice', 'agency' and 'equity' are pivotal and need to be relocated in any syllabi moving forward.

Key issues with the proposed syllabi are:

- the reduction in performance opportunities and ensemble size, this does not reflect real-world music making and performance
- reduction in topics and areas of choice in Music 1 is regressive and shows a disregard for research about student learning in music and shifts the focus to

written and aural skills which disadvantages certain groups of students more than others

- focus areas restrict options, autonomy and agency and creates barriers to keeping pace with the ever changing music industry and broader popular culture
- the 2-hour written exam does not reflect teaching music musically or authentic assessment via the modes of creating, performing and engaging with music
- elective choices for Music 1 assessment are lost and limited in Music 2 and Music Extension
- the Viva Voce means many students who are passionate about music can combine options to study a subject they enjoy, removing this again limits choice and options

If we lose the strengths of the current HSC Music courses, they are gone forever and will impact the next generation of music educators, and the continuous stream of composers, artists, creators, and ultimately impact the future of creative industries in Australia and beyond. It's a backward step, we can do better and should do better. The students and teachers deserve this!

The next part of our submission shares testimonials, firstly from Brad and then from previous students of his who are now working professionally in music.

Best wishes,

Testimonials

Dr Brad Merrick writes:

Having been closely involved with the delivery of all music subjects for the HSC (Music 1, Music 2, and Extension Music) for more than 30 years as a teacher, and now working to prepare the next generation of music teachers, it's incredibly sad to see the diminished offerings being proposed in the latest suite of HSC Syllabi documents, which have totally missed the point.

Ironically, these Music subjects have provided a perfect fit for the needs of thousands of students over the years, and their relevance and design also provided a rich mode of professional learning for NSW music educators each year. Combined with seeing so many students studying these subjects, the assessment design and marking process of creative submission (compositions and essays), live performance and viva voces saw

the itinerant marking and the interaction between teachers occupy a standard of engagement that was the envy of other states and territories, alongside locations around the world. I wonder how many of the music teachers who are currently classroom practitioners in the profession found their pathway through the study of one of these subjects! I can remember overseeing aspects of the practical marking process whereby 130 teachers would learn from each other and observe the students and the success of the practical subject design each year. Conversely, these teachers saw firsthand the joy and achievement of students as they engaged with music that was an extension of who they were, and their world. Music and the arts provide a unique experience, creating opportunities that transcend skills and knowledge, allowing personal connection, and emotional and social collaboration, where creativity and expression are central to the student experience.

It's amazing how many students found their home in these NSW Music subjects because they knew 'Why?' they were studying music and could pick a subject structure that aligned with their interests, and study genres that they were passionate and curious about. Most importantly, I watched students do amazing things because they were able to control the learning context to meet their needs. We know it is so critical and key to student motivation and success. That choice gave them a purpose and the drive to study and engage, regardless of their interest or level of musical background, the perfect suite of subject offerings. We want students to choose a subject because they enjoy doing it and can also achieve well.

In talking to colleagues over the past days and weeks, there are so many of these students who studied Music 1, Music 2, and Extension in NSW who are now touring the world in bands, orchestras, musicals, running studios or music business ventures, MD's of international touring companies, or working as educators and leaders to foster the next generation of artists and teachers. The value and success of these Music subjects have left an indelible mark on music education, but more importantly, the diverse Arts and music communities around Australia and beyond.

At a time when students and teachers are looking for subject choices that allow for diversity and inclusion, these new proposed subject designs, and the shift to more written examinations, decreased choice, and reduced practical assessment opportunities do not reflect the needs or emerging patterns within society, where music and the arts are such critical components of everyone's lives.

Here's hoping that the strength of united teacher voices and stories of the 'lived' experiences of students who have studied these options since their inception can turn back these proposed changes and sustain a suite of subjects that are the envy of so many Music Educators and Music Education jurisdictions around the world.

From a previous student now working professionally in the music industry:

The Music 2 Unit course for HSC was in many ways a career starter for me. I already had a passion for Music, it was my favourite subject at school, and the professional-level experience the course gave me in years 11 and 12 helped give me a sense of what being a working musician would be like, in the years to come. I regularly thought at the time,

“this is what I want to do when I leave school”. I enjoyed all parts of the course- theory, musicology, performance. My four major HSC performances were a highlight, an experience I enjoyed, not simply a set of exams to get through. I ended up coming first place in Music (2 unit), my passion for the subject and the very practical way it was implemented through the curriculum and by the music staff, helped achieve that result, but more importantly set me up with real world skills, experience and passion that I would continue with in the decades to come.

Nick Norton (Presently Lead Singer with Australian Rock Band – The Angels)
<http://nicknorton.com.au/> <https://theangels.com.au/>

I studied music throughout high school and did Music 1 in Year 11. It was during high school that I first experienced playing with other musicians in a rock band, which was encouraged and nurtured by my teachers, who often even let us rehearse in the music department after school. The music department also put on showcases several times per year, which gave us the experience of playing in front of an audience. I feel that these years were important in setting up a performance foundation that I could build upon. Many of the performance assessments in Music 1 were based around ensembles often comprising of up to 6 people, which was important for gaining an understanding and appreciation of how to perform dynamically. I did end up studying music at university, where I completed a Bachelor of Music. I then went on to complete a Graduate Diploma of Education. Since high school I have been professionally involved in music in several capacities such as music education, music retail and as a performing musician. I still often think back to my high school music days with a sense of gratitude.

Cat Hunter (Drummer – Percussion) with artists such as Little May, Rita Ora and many others <https://charlielawry.com/2016/02/24/cat-hunter-we-shouldnt-need-to-say-female-we-should-just-say-musicians/>

Music 2 and extension 2008: I loved my experience of music 2 and music extension with a major in performance in 2008. I performed 6 pieces across a variety of percussion instruments including with a full big band on drum kit, smaller ensembles across timpani, marimba and steel drum as well as with a single accompanist. Performing with such a range of ensembles really developed my skills as a session drummer and set me up for success in my career. I've been performing professionally around the world for the last 16 years. This course was paramount to preparing me for the industry. In introducing longer written exams and less options/choices across the subjects it will be detrimental to the students experience and limit their potential pathways as musicians. With the music industry struggling post covid and smaller music venues closing these courses really do offer performance experiences which are becoming harder to come by. As a professional musician you must be able to play for a substantial period of time, 2-3 songs just isn't enough. Please reconsider the proposed changes as I strongly believe they will limit the future opportunities of musicians and will have a lasting impact upon the musical fabric of society.

Otto Wicks-Green (Guitarist – Songwriter) <https://www.sleepmakeswaves.com/>

My name is Otto Wicks-Green, I'm a musician and songwriter with 3 times ARIA nominated rock group sleepmakeswaves. As a music 1 graduate from 2007 who went on to pursue a career in music, my experiences doing music 1 were really formative and valuable to me. As a student with less strength in music theory, the option to maximize my performance electives was really important to me, and my strong marks in this really boosted my confidence and the work I put in honed my skills. I'm concerned to hear about the changes to the course, which would put some of my skills in a difficult spot and make it harder to focus on and develop my strengths. In my HSC performances I also really benefited from playing with a bigger ensemble and I would hope future students get the chance to have these experiences and not have to focus mostly on an extended exam for such a tactile and fundamentally collaborative subject. Students of music will bring an array of aptitudes and strengths that a well-designed course will support and encourage. I support Brad Merrick in his objections to the planned changes to the music 1 and 2 subjects.

Another testimonial from a past student. Isabella Harvey ABMUSN RAN Band Sydney

Dear Dr Brad Merrick, thank you for reaching out—I'd be glad to share my perspective on the impact the HSC Music 2 and Extension syllabi had on my career as a musician in the Royal Australian Navy Band and why these proposed syllabus changes would be detrimental to future music students. The current Music 2 syllabus' variety of options allowed me to pursue areas that aligned with my career goals - the freedom to choose a wide range of repertoire and work in diverse ensemble settings assisted me in developing a broad skill set essential for adapting to the demands of a professional environment.

This breadth provided a strong foundation across multiple disciplines, which enhanced my versatility and depth of knowledge, especially when considering I experienced HSC Music as both a contemporary singer and a classical brass player. By reducing the electives with the introduction of new "Focus Areas", the new syllabus could limit students' choice, which may result in fewer opportunities to develop the high-level, multifaceted skills required in professional settings like the military, but it could also prove to be detrimental to those student musicians whose chosen instruments and musical backgrounds do not 'fit' into those study areas, leaving them disadvantaged and uninspired.

Under the current syllabus, Music 2 students can choose an additional topic and an elective focus in Year 12, selecting from performance, composition, or musicology. This choice allows students to tailor their studies to their strengths and interests, making the learning process more engaging and relevant. I was able to lean into my love of music performance in both Music 2 and Music Extension courses due to the respect afforded to the craft of performing under the current syllabus. In contrast, the proposed changes remove these electives, limiting students to a set content structure and mandatory tasks. This shift reduces flexibility, pushing all students into the same learning path

regardless of their unique musical aspirations or strengths. For Music Extension, the current syllabus is also entirely elective, where students can focus on performance, composition, or musicology. This approach lets them specialise deeply in a single area, promoting skill development in line with their goals. The proposed changes, however, enforce a written examination for all students and restrict them to fewer performance or composition options, which might disadvantage students, like me, who prefer practical over theoretical learning.

Had I studied Music Extension under the proposed changes my ability to focus intensively on the performance skills most relevant to my career in a military band setting would have been diluted. These seemingly arbitrary restrictions would reduce student autonomy, limiting the student's ability to develop independent learning and in-depth musical understanding that are valuable in a professional music career. The proposed changes allow for specialisation in certain areas, yet it risks narrowing students' experience too early or excluding students altogether. Currently, the syllabus encourages students to engage across multiple musical fields, promoting adaptability—a trait crucial in military musician roles, where performers must be proficient in various styles and settings. Specialising too early might result in significant knowledge or skill gaps, limiting students' flexibility in meeting professional demands across diverse genres.

Furthermore, doubling the time allocated to the written exam while reducing performance and composition options would shift focus away from hands-on, experiential learning—the foundation of music as an art form. The new syllabus reduces the number of performances and removes electives, meaning fewer opportunities to refine performance skills under examination conditions. This lack of consistent performance assessment could limit the development of the performance stamina and confidence at such a crucial developmental stage. The reduction of practical components may also leave students less prepared to perform under pressure, which is a daily reality in professional music careers. Ultimately, these proposed changes could severely undermine the quality of preparation students receive, especially those aiming for professional music careers. The current syllabus provided me with the technical foundation, critical thinking skills, empowerment, performance experience and versatility that are essential for my role in the Navy, and I believe that future music performance students deserve the same robust preparation. Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute.