

Article

Curriculum Devolution Under Neoliberal Pressures: The Case of Senior Secondary Music in Victoria, Australia and Its International Resonances

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Abstract

Under the pressures of neoliberalism, in Australia, the Victorian senior Music curriculum has been diminished. Neoliberal reforms have prioritised accountability, employability, and standardised outcomes, leading to a re-prioritisation of musical content and knowledge. This has led to reductions in musically specific content and increased focus on non-musical transferable skills. Concomitant has been an emphasis on informal processes within formal curricula. Highlighting implications for creativity, cultural diversity, and pedagogical practice, we contextualise changes to the Victorian example with curricula in the UK and US. Findings reveal a global trend toward more balanced, hybrid models integrating formal and informal learning. The findings inform debates on curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and policy development, highlighting the need for balanced approaches that preserve musical depth while accommodating broader educational goals.

Keywords: neoliberalism; senior school music curriculum; informal and formal education; music pedagogy; musical content and knowledge

1. Neoliberalism, Education and Music Education

Emerging in the 1980s, neoliberal political ideologies have had pervasive and pernicious impacts on all aspects of education (including policy, curricula, and pedagogies), becoming and “a dominant ideology of the times” (Sardoč, 2021, p. 224). The resulting commodification of education emphasises efficiency, competition, market value, and consumer choice (Aleo, 2023; Patrick, 2013). This is the result of a neoliberal ideology that “sees education not as a public good ideally serving a democratic society but as a private good primarily useful for preparing workers and consumers for the economy” (Saltman, 2014, p. 251). These emphases have led to a narrowing of the curriculum and a wider erosion of broader educational processes (Ball, 2012). Savage (2017) identifies two key features of curricular change as the inclusion of twenty-first century skills and the incursions of vocational and applied agenda. Driven by neoliberal agendas, the introduction of national and state standards, have further narrowed and limited education, including “inter-related changes to the nature of teaching, the delimiting of student learning, the diminishing prioritisation of contextual and deep knowledge and... the narrowing of the curricula and the narrowing of focus within subject areas themselves” (O'Connor & McTaggart, 2017, p. 62). In Australia, the National Assessment program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (<https://www.nap.edu.au/naplan> accessed 9 November 2025) excludes the arts including music which further de-emphasises the importance of music in educational



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programs. Between neoliberal ideologies and standardised testing, it is unsurprising that curricular statements for the arts including music have been reduced to broad brushstrokes that accommodate consumer choice and industry aligned values and skills. Concomitant with these changes is the pedagogical shift to increased emphasis on informal learning (Green, 2016).

In this eroding landscape of school music education, we focus on recent changes to the Music curriculum framework for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) (<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/vce-curriculum/vce-study-designs/music/music> accessed 9 November 2025) which caters for the final years of schooling. We investigate the devolution of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Music curriculum under neoliberal pressures and identify international resonances in similar countries such as the UK and US.

2. Methodology

This study employs a systematic document analysis, a qualitative interpretative method that constructs empirical knowledge through the systematic examination of texts to address specific research questions (Bowen, 2009; Gross, 2018). It requires researchers to locate, interpret, analyse, and draw conclusions about the evidence presented in documents (Fitzgerald, 2012). This approach is particularly suited to curriculum research, where policy texts and study designs reflect underlying ideological and pedagogical priorities. Document analysis is an interpretative process that goes beyond extracting explicit information to uncover implicit meanings, goals, perspectives, biases and assumptions embedded in texts. Documents are socially and politically constructed, reflecting institutional agendas and ideological positions (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022). By systematically analysing curriculum texts, this study explores how such agendas manifest in music education and how they influence pedagogical orientations, content priorities, and assessment structures.

The primary data set comprises VCE Music study designs published by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). These include:

- 2017–2022 accreditation period.

- 2023–2027 accreditation period.

- Selected sections from 2011 to 2016, as these largely align with the 2017–2022 framework.

These documents govern senior secondary music education in Victoria, typically for students in Years 11 and 12 (ages 16–19), although some units may be undertaken in Year 10 depending on school offerings. The analysis focuses on how learning in music (within the Arts discipline area) is described and how this shapes what may be taught, how, and why. Secondary sources include:

- Victorian government policy papers relevant to curriculum reform.

- Peer-reviewed scholarly literature on curriculum analysis, neoliberalism in education, and music pedagogy (Crawford & Southcott, 2024; Johansen, 2013; Young, 2023).

All sources are authoritative and published by formal educational bodies or in peer-reviewed journals to ensure reliability and scholarly rigour.

Effective analysis requires contextualisation, iterative reading, thematic coding, and critical reflexivity to identify patterns, contradictions, and silences (Bowen, 2009). In the context of neoliberal education reforms, curriculum documents often encode aspirational goals aligned with economic rationalism, employability, and accountability measures (Aróstegui, 2020; Goble, 2021). From the inductive coding, emerging themes were organised into categorising tables for preliminary analysis, as recommended in prior curriculum research (Crawford & Southcott, 2017, 2024; Southcott & Crawford, 2011). Each author independently coded the documents, then a robust discussion combined and built the emergent themes (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Themes included:

Content priorities: Musically specific knowledge versus non-musical transferable skills.

Curriculum diminution: Reduction in discipline-based knowledge and skills.

Assessment structures: Shifts toward standardised outcomes, general competencies and employability measures.

Pedagogical orientations: Integration of informal processes within formal curricula.

Preliminary categorisation was challenging, as curriculum documents often lack consistent patterns even within a single jurisdiction ([Greatorex et al., 2019](#); [Prøitz, 2023](#)). To address this, direct quotations from study designs were incorporated to provide texture and authenticity. This approach aligns with previous research emphasising the value of textual evidence in curriculum critique ([Crawford & Southcott, 2024](#)).

To situate the Victorian case within global trends, we used scholarly critiques of published curriculum documents from the UK and US. Comparative research in music education provides a lens for understanding similarities and differences across contexts and for mapping the influence of global policy trends ([Johansen, 2013](#)). This framework examined:

Learning goals and outcomes.

Assessment requirements.

Integration of informal learning processes.

Policy drivers and neoliberal influences.

Methodological guidance for curriculum comparison was drawn from [Greatorex et al. \(2019\)](#), who propose systematic approaches for mapping curricular structures, and from historical and cultural comparative studies ([Groulx, 2013](#)). Additionally, [Fautley and Daubney \(2022\)](#) provide critical insights into the UK context, highlighting how assessment frameworks shape curriculum priorities and reflect broader policy agendas. Similarly, [Mullen \(2019\)](#) examines the US National Core Arts Standards, revealing how neoliberal and neoconservative influences embed standardised benchmarks and employability discourses into music education. These studies exemplify the type of comparative research considered in this analysis.

The authors acknowledge their positionality as experienced initial tertiary education specialists and music educators. They have extensive experience working within evolving curriculum frameworks and possess recognised expertise in curriculum analysis. Their professional standing is evidenced by frequent invitations to consult on reforms to Australian curricula, reflecting their authority in shaping policy and practice ([Crawford, 2017b](#); [Crawford & Southcott, 2017, 2024](#); [Southcott & Crawford, 2011](#); [Stevens & Southcott, 2010](#)). While this expertise enriches interpretation, it also introduces potential bias. To mitigate this, the study adhered to systematic procedures and grounded interpretations in textual evidence and peer-reviewed scholarship ([Johansen, 2013](#)). Transparency in analytical processes and acknowledgment of positionality are essential to maintaining credibility and rigour. As this research relies exclusively on publicly available documents and secondary literature, no human participants were involved, and ethical clearance was not required. Nevertheless, ethical principles of transparency and integrity were upheld throughout the research process.

This methodological approach is timely given ongoing reforms to senior secondary curricula and their implications for the broader Victorian Curriculum (Foundation to Year 10). By systematically analysing curriculum texts and situating findings within international contexts, this study contributes to understanding how neoliberal pressures shape music education globally.

3. Findings

3.1. Aims and Assessment in Senior Secondary Music

The VCE is a senior secondary qualification typically completed over two years, comprising studies from curriculum key learning areas. Each study consists of four semester-long units, with Units 1 and 2 generally undertaken in the first year and Units 3 and 4 in the second. While Units 1 and 2 may be studied independently, Units 3 and 4 must be completed as a sequence within the same year for a study score to be awarded. This score, ranging from 0 to 50, reflects a student's ranking relative to all peers completing the same study in that year (VCAA, 2022a). To achieve the VCE, students must complete at least 16 units, including three from the English group (two of which must form a Unit 3–4 sequence) and three additional Unit 3–4 sequences. Most students select between 20 and 24 units across five or six studies during Years 11 and 12. The VCE offers over 90 studies and more than 20 VCE Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes spanning humanities, sciences, mathematics, technology, arts, languages, and vocational fields (VCAA, 2022a). While this breadth is intended to promote diverse learning pathways, availability depends on school resources and enrolment demand, creating access inequities.

Assessment structures reflect a dual system of school-based and external moderation. Units 1 and 2 are assessed internally, with teachers assigning Satisfactory (S) or Non-Satisfactory (N) results. Schools may provide grades, but only the S/N outcome contributes to VCE completion. Units 3 and 4 involve graded assessments (A+ to E, UG, or NA) alongside S/N results, typically a combination of School-assessed Coursework (SAC), School-assessed Tasks (SAT), and externally set examinations. External assessments, which may be written, oral, performance-based, or electronic, are centrally set and marked by VCAA-appointed assessors. Final results achieved influence tertiary entry through the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), calculated by the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre based on study scores. There is a perception of VCE being primarily a university entrance credential, despite policy efforts to broaden its vocational relevance (Polidano et al., 2014; Victorian Government, 2024).

In Victoria, a major structural reform to the senior secondary curriculum occurred in 2023, with the introduction of the VCE Vocational Major. This programme is designed to embed applied learning and aims to prepare students for apprenticeships, traineeships, further education, and direct workforce entry (VCAA, 2022a). The 2024 *Australian Universities Accord* outlines a long-term reform agenda for tertiary education, seeking to create a system that is more responsive to labour market needs, promotes equity in access and participation, and strengthens skills development to support Australia's future workforce (Australian Government, 2024). Together, these developments signal a growing emphasis on vocational and informal learning pathways (Crawford, 2017b), setting the context for changes in the VCE Music study design discussed in the following section. By comparison, recent analysis of Queensland's VET in Schools (VETiS) programmes within the broader framework of the Accord highlights a critical misalignment between VETiS enrolments and labour market priorities. While participation rates are high, the qualifications most commonly undertaken do not align with sectors experiencing acute skills shortages (Arthurs et al., 2025). This disconnect suggests that current policy settings prioritise broad educational attainment targets rather than strategic alignment with workforce demand, undermining the stated goal of addressing skills shortages.

3.2. VCE Music Study Design

Senior secondary music education in Victoria is framed around active engagement with music as a creative, performative, and analytical practice. Students are expected to develop musicianship skills, refine technical and expressive capabilities, and cultivate

critical awareness of their roles as listeners, performers, and creators. The current VCE Music scope of study emphasises that students should explore, reflect on, and respond to music they listen to, create, and perform, while analysing live and recorded performances and incorporating diverse musical practices from different cultures, times, and contexts into their own learning (VCAA, 2022b). This approach positions music as both an artistic and social practice, encouraging students to communicate musical ideas effectively and engage in informed composition, arrangement, improvisation, and critique. A notable shift in the 2023–2027 accreditation period is the explicit recognition of formal and informal learning contexts, a first in VCE Music study design history (VCAA, 2022b; Crawford, 2017b). While this inclusion reflects broader educational trends toward applied and student-centred learning, the absence of detailed guidance on implementation raises concerns about consistency and equity across schools. Without clear parameters, the interpretation of “informal learning” may vary significantly, potentially reinforcing disparities in programme quality.

3.3. *Evolution of Rationale and Aims*

Across the three most recent accreditation periods, the rationale for VCE Music has broadened. The 2017–2022 design introduced language linking music study to pathways in training and tertiary education, resonating with research highlighting the correlation between higher educational attainment and improved life outcomes (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). In the current design (2023–2027), the rationale shifts toward personalised musicianship, suggesting a move away from holistic contexts toward specialised areas aligned with student interests. This is positioned within system-wide reforms such as the VCE Vocational Major, which promotes flexible, applied learning pathways and non-ATAR transitions into further education and employment (VCAA, 2023a). Additionally, the rationale now foregrounds lifelong learning and cultural contribution, echoing global policy priorities for education to foster community engagement and cultural participation (Dabback, 2017; UNESCO, 2025). We add that although the curriculum may be changing to incorporate diverse music repertoire and practice, there may not be a concomitant shift in the pedagogy employed to deliver this breadth of practice (Graham & Ward, 2023/2024).

The aims remain broadly consistent across the three accreditations periods, but reveal subtle linguistic and conceptual changes. For instance, earlier references to “compose” have evolved into “create, recreate, reimagine and respond,” reflecting contemporary music-making practices. Similarly, engagement with “diverse genres and styles” has been reframed as engagement with music from “diverse times, places, cultures and contexts, including recently created music,” signalling an expectation that current musical trends be incorporated. Interestingly, explicit mention of “electronic and digital technologies” as an aim has been removed, implying that technology use is now an embedded general capability rather than a discrete curricular objective (Crawford & Southcott, 2017, 2024; Southcott & Crawford, 2011).

3.4. *Entry Requirements and Structural Changes*

Entry requirements have progressively relaxed. While earlier designs recommended substantial prior instrumental experience, up to four or five years for advanced units, such guidance is absent in the current study design. This deregulation reflects a neoliberal emphasis on individual autonomy and open access, but it may also dilute domain-specific expectations, potentially impacting depth of learning.

Structurally, the study design has undergone significant reconfiguration. Previous accreditation periods (2011–2016; 2017–2022) maintained a stable sequence: Music Performance Units 1–4 and Music Investigation Units 3–4, alongside Music Style and Composition Units 1–4. In contrast, the 2023–2027 design introduces new unit titles and pathways:

Unit 1: Organisation in Music

Unit 2: Effect in Music

Unit 3–4 sequences: Music Inquiry, Music Contemporary Performance, Music Repertoire Performance, and Music Composition

The differentiation between “Contemporary” and “Repertoire” is revealing. While Repertoire Performance retains curated lists of recommended works and specialised terminology, Contemporary Performance adopts a more open-ended approach, eschewing prescriptive repertoire and traditional nomenclature. This shift suggests a deliberate move toward inclusivity and flexibility, accommodating diverse musical identities and informal learning practices, yet it also raises questions about maintaining rigorous standards and shared benchmarks.

Across all three accreditation periods (2011–2016, 2017–2022, and 2023–2027), the mandated duration for each VCE Music unit has remained consistent at a minimum of 50 h of scheduled classroom instruction. The most recent clarification specifies that these hours should occur within a single semester (approximately 20–24 weeks). Core learning activities, such as classroom-based instruction, instrumental lessons, and ensemble rehearsals, have been retained throughout. A notable addition in the 2017–2022 period was the inclusion of masterclasses, which could be delivered in real time or online. Blended learning practices became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic and is now an anticipated element in music education (Camlin & Lisboa, 2021).

Safety and wellbeing provisions have also evolved. Foundational requirements, such as compliance with Victorian WorkCover Authority and Department of Education guidelines on acoustic treatment, ventilation, electrical safety, posture, and physical warm-ups, have remained constant. The 2023–2027 study design introduces a significant expansion, attending to psychological wellbeing, acknowledging the emotional demands of performance and the stress associated with playing for an audience. The current guidelines emphasise strategies to support students’ mental health across practice, performance, and post-performance reflection, while recognising music’s potential to foster autonomy, mastery, and social connectedness (VCAA, 2022b). This shift likely reflects the profound impact of extended school closures globally during pandemic lockdown period, which disrupted music education and heightened concerns about student wellbeing (Anderson, 2024; Barbeau et al., 2024; Cheng & Lam, 2021; Habe et al., 2021). The pandemic amplified challenges for music learning and mental health, highlighting music’s role in mitigating anxiety and promoting resilience (Canham, 2023; Dollman, 2023; Fang & Chen, 2025; Sun, 2022).

Participatory music-making, particularly ensemble performance, has been shown to strengthen social cohesion and provide emotional release, making it a critical tool for recovery in post-pandemic education (Dollman, 2023). However, an overemphasis on the purely extrinsic benefits of music education, such as improved academic performance or employability, risks devaluing the discipline by reducing its purpose to functional or instrumental outcomes rather than recognising its inherent artistic and cultural worth. Music education possesses unique intrinsic qualities that foster creativity, aesthetic appreciation, and personal expression, which cannot be fully captured through utilitarian measures (Crawford, 2017a). When advocacy for music education relies predominantly on non-musical benefits, it perpetuates a narrow view that undermines the holistic and transformative potential of music as a lifelong practice (Crawford, 2017a; Crooke, 2016). A balanced approach is essential, one that acknowledges music’s capacity to enrich human experience, develop identity, and cultivate social and emotional wellbeing, alongside any ancillary academic or cognitive gains. The inclusion of wellbeing strategies in curriculum design suggests a broader pedagogical recalibration, one that balances technical and theoretical rigour with experiential learning and personal relevance. While this move

aligns with post-pandemic priorities, it also intersects with tensions between postmodern educational ideals (emphasising individual meaning-making) and neoliberal imperatives (prioritising flexibility and choice) (Crawford & Southcott, 2024; Nakar & Olssen, 2022; Simpson, 2024). The challenge ahead lies in achieving equilibrium, ensuring that VCE Music remains both personally meaningful and academically robust.

3.5. Comparing VCE Music Unit 1 and Unit 3 Performance Offerings

To illustrate how expectations for musicianship have evolved across accreditation periods, this analysis compares two key points in the VCE Music curriculum: the introductory unit most commonly offered to students (Unit 1) and a senior-level performance outcome (Unit 3). In the 2011–2016 and 2017–2022 periods, Unit 1 was titled Music Performance, whereas in the current 2023–2027 design, it has been rebranded as Organisation of Music. Similarly, Outcome 1 from Unit 3 Music Performance in earlier designs is compared with Outcome 1 from Unit 3 Music Contemporary Performance and Music Repertoire Performance in the current design (see Table 1).

Table 1. VCE Music Study Design Unit 1 and Unit 3—Key Changes Across Accreditation Periods.

Aspect	Accreditation Period		
	2011–2016	2017–2022	2023–2027
Unit 1 Title & Focus	Music Performance: Prepare and perform a practised programme of group and solo works.	Music Performance: Prepare and perform a programme of group and solo works with contextual awareness.	Organisation of Music: Rehearse and present planned performances using technical control, expression, and stylistic understanding; link to investigation of music organisation.
Unit 1 Key Knowledge	Detailed musical terminology (tone, phrasing, articulation, groove, intonation); historical/contemporary conventions; interpretation strategies; use of scores and recordings.	Adds technology references (mutes, effects pedals, looping software); musicianship skills; arranging and shaping works.	Highly condensed: organisation of works, basic instrumental/ensemble practice, general technology use; minimal technical detail.
Unit 1 Key Skills	Perform diverse works; demonstrate tone control, flexibility, and expressive shaping; apply historical conventions.	Research-based interpretation; rehearse and perform informed programmes; apply musicianship skills.	Generalised skills: technical control, identify challenges, plan improvements, reflect on feedback; less emphasis on stylistic nuance.
Unit 3 Title & Focus	Music Performance: Present informed, accurate, expressive performance of group and solo works.	Music Performance: Prepare and perform diverse works demonstrating techniques and stylistic understanding.	Split into Contemporary Performance (personal voice, Performer’s Statement of Intent) and Repertoire Performance (prescribed works, stylistic conventions).
Unit 3 Key Knowledge	Emphasis on stylistic diversity, expressive elements, idiomatic tone, interpretation strategies, historical/cultural influences.	Adds arranging possibilities, technology use, and presentation techniques; strong focus on musicianship and artistic intention.	Contemporary: personal voice, reimagining works, stylistic techniques; Repertoire: artistic/practical considerations, prescribed lists, technology as applicable.
Unit 3 Key Skills	Prepare and present diverse programmes; demonstrate accuracy, fluency, idiomatic tone; apply historical/contemporary conventions; ensemble interaction.	Learn, rehearse, and perform informed interpretations; apply musicianship skills; effective sound production; presentation conventions.	Contemporary: formulate Performer’s Statement, reimagine works, develop personal voice; Repertoire: select and perform works showing stylistic understanding and interpretative ideas.

4. Unit 1: From Performance to Organisation

The shift in title from Music Performance to Organisation of Music signals a conceptual reframing. While earlier iterations emphasised technical mastery and expressive detail, the current design foregrounds broader organisational and interpretative processes. This change coincides with a noticeable reduction in subject-specific terminology and technical precision. For example, the 2011–2016 design explicitly referenced expressive elements such as tempo, dynamics, phrasing, articulation, groove, feel, and intonation. The 2017–2022 design added references to technologies, such as mutes, effects pedals, looping software, and effects processors—reflecting contemporary performance practices. In contrast, the 2023–2027 design collapses these specifics into a general statement about “effective instrumental and ensemble/group practice, including, as appropriate, the use of music-making technology, devices and sound equipment” (VCAA, 2022b).

A similar trend appears in the Key Skills descriptors. Earlier designs required students to “demonstrate and discuss a planned approach to improving instrumental and presentation techniques relevant to the performance of selected works.” The current version offers more generic phrasing, reducing clarity about what constitutes rigorous preparation. This linguistic simplification raises concerns about curricular dilution, where the absence of precise musical language may compromise depth of learning and assessment consistency (Crawford & Southcott, 2024; Fautley & Daubney, 2022; Hennessy & Corr, 2021). Such reductions often reflect neoliberal pressures to prioritise flexibility and inclusivity over disciplinary rigour, resulting in a narrowing of specialist knowledge (Goble, 2021; Mullen, 2019).

5. Unit 3: Diverging Pathways

Changes at the senior level amplify these tensions. In previous accreditation periods, Unit 3 was uniformly titled Music Performance, with clearly defined expectations and repertoire lists drawn largely from Western Art Music (WAM) and established popular styles. The current design fragments this into multiple pathways: Music Contemporary Performance, Music Repertoire Performance, and Music Composition. While Repertoire Performance retains curated lists and specialised terminology, Contemporary Performance prioritises performer intent and the development of a “personal voice.” Although this inclusivity reflects a commendable effort to embrace diverse musical identities, it introduces ambiguity in assessment standards. Phrases such as “apply authentic performance conventions and a range of techniques” lack specificity, making it difficult to ensure comparability across programmes, particularly given the stated requirement that “all VCE studies are benchmarked against comparable national and international curriculum” (VCAA, 2022b).

6. Key Trends Highlighted and Implications for Equity and Rigour

The key trends highlighted using the exemplar of VCE Music Units 1 and 3 can be summarised as follows:

Terminology reduction: Progressive simplification of technical language and expressive detail from 2011 to 2016 to 2023 to 2027.

Technology integration: Explicit in 2017–2022, implicit in 2023–2027.

Assessment ambiguity: 2023–2027 introduces open-ended pathways (Contemporary vs. Repertoire), raising comparability concerns.

Shift in pedagogical emphasis: From structured, idiomatic performance toward flexible, student-centred approaches prioritising personal voice and informal learning contexts.

The intention behind these changes, to support student agency and broaden participation, is consistent with the principle that “senior secondary education is about developing and realising every student’s potential” (VCAA, 2023b). By attempting to accommodate all

learners, the curriculum risks becoming overly malleable, potentially undermining rigour for students aspiring to professional music careers. This tension between inclusivity and depth reflects broader policy debates about balancing vocational flexibility with disciplinary integrity (Crawford & Southcott, 2024; Nakar & Olssen, 2022). With vague expectations, students seeking tertiary music pathways may find themselves underprepared, while those engaging for enrichment may experience a less structured learning environment. Achieving equilibrium between these competing priorities is essential.

7. Discussion: Global Policy Trends and Neoliberal Influences

The evolution of the VCE Music curriculum reflects broader global trends in education policy and patterns in senior secondary education shaped by neoliberal ideologies. Similar patterns are evident in the UK and US, where reforms have emphasised accountability, employability, and standardisation at the expense of disciplinary depth and cultural diversity. In England, music education at the senior secondary level is structured through GCSE Music (typically ages 14–16) and A-Level Music (ages 16–18). Both qualifications emphasise assessment through written examinations and performance tasks, aligning with high-stakes accountability frameworks. Recent reforms, including the Model Music Curriculum, have been critiqued for privileging Western Art Music and measurable outcomes, narrowing opportunities for creative and culturally diverse practices (Young, 2023; Fautley & Daubney, 2022). These changes reflect a neoliberal logic that prioritises efficiency and benchmarking over holistic musical engagement. This is despite recent efforts to re-centre creativity and diversity through initiatives such as the abolition of the English Baccalaureate and renewed investment in arts education (Curriculum and Assessment Review, 2025; Independent Society of Musicians [ISM], 2025).

In the US, the *National Core Arts Standards* (NCAS) exemplify neoliberal rationalities by embedding music education within frameworks of accountability, efficiency, and workforce readiness. These standards represent a hegemonic alliance between neoliberal and neoconservative interests, linking music learning to economic utility and codifying Eurocentric epistemologies of musical value (Mullen, 2019). This alignment prioritises uniform benchmarks and measurable outcomes, often at the expense of creativity, cultural diversity, and democratic participation in music education. Weakened music education by advancing market-driven logics that commodify learning and marginalise non-economic purposes of schooling (Goble, 2021). Skills such as “creativity” and “critical thinking” have been reframed as employability tools rather than intrinsic educational goals, reducing their transformative potential (Damerow, 2023). Music programmes increasingly adopt entrepreneurial discourses, encouraging students to “market themselves” and align learning outcomes with job training, reflecting a neoliberal emphasis on self-governance and human capital development (Belcher et al., 2023). These trends have significant consequences for equity and access. Funding cuts and the prioritisation of STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects have pushed music education to the periphery, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities (Burrack et al., 2014; National Association of Music Merchants [NAMM], 2011, 2023; National Foundation for Music Education [NAfME], 2025). Informal and non-formal pedagogies, such as community-based music programmes and popular music learning approaches, have emerged as counter-hegemonic spaces that resist neoliberal standardisation by fostering student agency, cultural inclusion, and collaborative creativity (Green, 2016; Jenkins, 2011; Weatherly et al., 2025). However, their integration into formal schooling remains uneven, and tensions persist between democratic ideals and market-driven imperatives. The same can be said for programmes that are overly reliant on informal learning models, highlighting the critical importance of balancing both formal and informal learning opportunities (Crawford, 2017b).

Neoliberal reforms reshape music education by privileging standardised learning contexts and diminishing the role of creativity and cultural diversity. The narrowing of curriculum content and reduction in technical specificity observed in VCE Music mirrors international trends toward generalised competencies and transferable skills (Crawford & Southcott, 2024; Fautley & Daubney, 2019, 2022). This shift has profound implications for pedagogy:

Formal learning: Increasingly aligned with accountability measures and performance metrics, formal curricula risk becoming prescriptively vague through the use of general language and terminology, reducing technically musical language, knowledge and expectations and less responsive to diverse student needs.

Non-formal and informal learning: Community-based and student-led practices offer counterpoints to neoliberal standardisation, fostering autonomy, identity formation, and cultural inclusion (Green, 2016; Storsve, 2024). These approaches can resist market-driven priorities by emphasising collaboration, creativity, and social justice.

Creativity and cultural diversity: Global research highlights a decline in opportunities for creative exploration and engagement with diverse musical traditions under neoliberal regimes (Macarthur et al., 2024; Mullen, 2019). In practice, this constrains student agency and undermines music's potential as a vehicle for intercultural understanding, despite curriculum goals implying the opposite.

The emphasis on employability and measurable outcomes reframes students as consumers within an educational marketplace, reducing their capacity to engage critically and creatively with music (León, 2014; Goble, 2021). While reforms claim to broaden access, they often exacerbate inequities by privileging those with prior musical capital and external resources (Independent Society of Musicians [ISM], 2025). Conversely, informal and non-formal pedagogies, such as collaborative composition, peer-led ensembles, and community music programmes, can counterbalance these effects by promoting inclusivity and empowering students as co-creators of knowledge (Jenkins, 2011; Storsve, 2024).

The Victorian case exemplifies tensions between inclusivity and rigour, vocational flexibility and disciplinary integrity, issues echoed internationally. While the VCE Music redesign aligns with global discourses on personalisation and applied learning, its reduction in technical detail and ambiguous assessment criteria parallels concerns raised in UK and US contexts about curriculum dilution and benchmarking (Young, 2023; Mullen, 2019). These developments highlight the critical need for balanced policy frameworks that safeguard musical depth (appropriate knowledge and technical skills levels) while embracing diverse pathways. Framing these evolutions are the foundational decisions about what music to include and what to omit which reflect deliberate choices by those in positions of authority over curriculum (Ward et al., 2025).

8. Conclusions

This study examined the devolution of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Music curriculum across three accreditation periods (2011–2016, 2017–2022, and 2023–2027), situating these changes within global trends shaped by neoliberal education reforms. The analysis revealed a progressive reduction in subject-specific terminology and technical detail, alongside a shift toward generalised competencies, personalisation, and applied learning. While these changes aim to broaden access and support diverse pathways, they risk diluting disciplinary rigour and creating ambiguity in assessment standards. Similar patterns were identified in senior secondary music education in England (GCSE and A-Level) and the United States (National Core Arts Standards), where neoliberal drivers prioritise accountability, employability, and standardisation, often at the expense of creativity, cultural diversity, and student agency, despite implied intentions. Key insights include:

Curriculum dilution: The simplification of technical language and performance expectations in VCE Music parallels international trends toward competency-based frameworks, raising concerns about depth and comparability.

Neoliberal pressures: Global reforms increasingly frame music education as instrumental to economic goals, marginalising intrinsic artistic and cultural values.

Pedagogical tensions: Formal curricula emphasise measurable outcomes, while informal and non-formal learning contexts emerge as spaces for resistance and popular culture. Importantly, fostering creativity, collaboration, and cultural inclusion can only be achieved when there is a balance of these pedagogical approaches, also ensuring the rigour of discipline-based skills and knowledge with student engagement and interest.

The future trajectory of music education lies in hybrid models that integrate formal, non-formal, and informal pedagogies. Digital learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue to shape delivery, offering opportunities for flexible, student-centred approaches. However, technology must complement, not replace, embodied, collaborative music-making. Advocacy for music and arts education must strike a balance between intrinsic values (creativity, cultural identity, aesthetic experience) and extrinsic benefits (transferable skills, employability, wellbeing). As Crawford (2017a) argues, overemphasising extrinsic benefits risks devaluing music's artistic essence, yet ignoring them can weaken advocacy in policy contexts. A balanced approach affirms music's role in nurturing identity, emotional wellbeing, and cultural participation, alongside transferable skills that support lifelong learning and employability. This dual framing can strengthen the case for music education in policy arenas without reducing its purpose to utilitarian ends. We this in mind we offer recommendations for policy and practice:

Maintain disciplinary integrity: Curriculum frameworks should preserve core musical knowledge, skills, and technical rigour while accommodating diverse genres and creative practices.

Embed cultural diversity and creativity: Policies must ensure that music education reflects pluralistic traditions and fosters innovation, resisting homogenisation under neoliberal agendas.

Strengthen pathways and equity: Clear articulation between school-based music programmes, tertiary study, and vocational opportunities is essential, alongside targeted support for underrepresented communities.

Leverage a balance of formal and informal learning: Incorporate informal and community-based approaches within formal learning opportunities and curricula to enhance student agency and engagement. There must be a balance to avoid a reductionist approach as demonstrated in some music programmes (Crawford, 2017b; Crawford & Southcott, 2024).

Invest in teacher professional learning development: Equip educators to navigate hybrid pedagogies, digital technologies, and culturally responsive practices.

Advocate holistically—valuing both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits: Position music education as critical for its unique intrinsic qualities that foster creativity, aesthetic appreciation, and personal expression, balanced with its extrinsic value, important for personal, social, and cultural development, not merely as a tool for economic competitiveness.

In sum, sustaining a vibrant and equitable music education ecosystem requires resisting reductive policy logics and embracing pedagogical pluralism. By balancing rigour with flexibility, and intrinsic with extrinsic values, music education can remain a transformative force in the lives of learners and communities worldwide.

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