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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the cessation of the Music
for Colleges course

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Submission to the Inquiry into the cessation of the Music for Colleges course

I am the parent of a student currently enrolled in what may yet be the last year of the Music for Colleges program also called the H-course music. She is in the Classical stream. I can only comment from a personal perspective, but I wish to submit to the enquiry my understandings and experiences of being a parent of a student with a passion for music. I will address these in the context of your specified terms of reference.

1a. Demonstrated long-term benefits and outcomes

A significant, tangible and personal outcome of the H-course has been for my daughter and our family. The H-course gave her an opportunity to study classical music at a college and pre-tertiary level when the college for which we are zoned was not able to offer such a class due to low numbers. It has allowed her to continue to build her skills and be with other people who play at her level and share her passion. It is difficult to imagine her being able to meet this amazing group of young musicians any other way. At this stage she is not sure what the outcomes will be in the longer term, but my daughter and many of her cohort are currently planning tertiary studies in music.

More generally, I am aware that during the thirty-odd-year life of the H-course in its various forms, a significant number of the students have gone on to tertiary study in music and thence found work in performance and teaching. The benefits of this are clear. People have derived gainful employment, satisfying careers, and enriched lives as a direct result of the H-Course, for three decades.

The ACT Government does an excellent job of providing a fine music education across the school years, for good reason. Music has demonstrable long-term benefits and outcomes in better mental health both for students and the wider community, improved specific learning outcomes for students, and a wider societal wellbeing. The ACT Government should be proud of its record and long-term commitment to music in the primary and secondary years, and its contribution to a musical culture that betters us all.

My daughter and our family are without doubt beneficiaries of the Government's commitment to music education, as our daughter found her passion when she was a youngster at [REDACTED] Primary School, and then developed it through the extraordinary music programs delivered by [REDACTED] High School, which utterly cemented her interest and gave her fantastic opportunities. The H-course was the final logical component of this and has provided her with rich and complex learnings.

I applaud the commitment by the ACT Government to music education with its obvious benefits and outcomes. This carefully considered program encourages children to develop a significant interest in music in the primary and secondary years, and even supports some of them, a bit of the time and in certain genres, through college. But with the cessation of the H-course some students, particularly those who have studied hard and benefitted most from the commitment to music in ACT schools, have now been deliberately deprived of the ability to continue their studies at the college and pre-tertiary level. It is shortsighted and even cruel.

1b. Demand

Entry to the H-course was by audition, and a high standard was required. Despite this, I have not been told of a scenario where either the Classical or Jazz H-course classes had difficulty filling the places. My understanding is the classes were always full. This is despite three private schools and one ACT college offering studies in classical music in years 11 and 12, and most colleges offering jazz or rock. There was, without doubt, demand for this - an extension music course able to teach the dedicated students aiming possibly for tertiary studies in music and requiring further extension.

The current cohort in the H-course Classical stream is comprised of both public and private school students, demonstrating that the private and public systems are individually not able to meet the demand for pre-tertiary extension classical music education in the higher years of school through the programs they currently offer. Further, I believe the public system only offers classical music in one college, and that is south of Lake Burley Griffin. Arguably even it does not meet all the needs of the students, as there are current H-course students from that college too. From 2019, students living north of the lake and wishing to pursue any such study will have to consider the private system, if they are able to get in, or travel very long distances by ACT standards. In real terms it takes an hour each way to travel by public transport from the inner north to the only college offering a relevant course. This will of course be extended for students travelling from Belconnen and Gungahlin.

In terms of demand for musicians, our society has more need of them than ever. Music brings us together and makes the world a better place. In fact studies in classical music can lead directly to careers in orchestras, musical theatre, film, television, dance and the online space. There are also possibilities in teaching and music therapy. If anything, demand for music and music education is increasing, and the medical and allied health spaces continue to research and better understand the beneficial effects of music on human health.

Although classical music can be seen as niche, there is clearly a demand for it, as demonstrated by audience sizes. Orchestras based in Canberra regularly play to large audiences and attract excellent guest musicians and soloists. Tours by organisations from elsewhere also attract audiences, and musical theatre performances in Canberra and Queanbeyan are regularly sold out. A very recent former H-course student has in the last two years been both the assistant and musical director of well-reviewed musical theatre shows. He is personally contributing to the better wellbeing of many Canberra people in a very tangible way. Further, on a freezing cold, foggy Sunday morning in May this year, current and former H-course students played to a packed house as members of the Canberra Youth Orchestra in the Fitters Workshop, as part of the Canberra International Music Festival. They played a new work in its world premier, composed by another former Canberra music student. This concert was sold out and many people were turned away.

College and university students wanting to listen to, learn and perform classical music are something of a surprise to me. It has the reputation for being the province of the aged and elite. However, to my surprise and with little family influence, my daughter has been drawn to the genre, as have others of her age and capacity. They are not all aiming to be rock musicians or composers for online games, and it appears they will have their audiences. If the H-course is reinstated, they will put in the hours of dedicated practice required to play music at this level, by themselves and with each other. They are dedicated and enthusiastic. Classical music speaks to a different place in peoples' souls and we can continue the relationship as practitioners and audiences in Canberra into the future if we choose to by reinstating the education of young musicians.

The notion that classical music is the preserve of an elite is a fallacy in the context of the H-Course. Participating students come, as I understand it, from all walks of life and all economic situations. There are children of single parents who do without so their kids can grow as musicians. Some are from rural areas surrounding Canberra and travel huge distances for this. Some families go to extraordinary lengths to ensure their kids have this opportunity - driving miles to lessons and classes on the other side of Canberra in peak hour because the buses won't get there in time, juggling sporting commitments, supporting their young players at many concerts, and purchasing or hiring expensive instruments. We do it because we understand the myriad benefits. Music is a team sport, an academic tutor, an utterly engrossing hobby, a comforting solace, a positive mental health program and perhaps a rewarding career. And we do it because we know that without music our kids are sad and purposeless. This is what underpins the demand for the H-Course.

1c. Programs on offer

Without the H-Course, there are no high-level pre-tertiary programs on offer in the ACT. What the H-course program provided, to those two or three very competent music students in every college, was the opportunity to study music at a very high level, to play music with their peers, and to study with specialist teachers, building on what they had already learned in primary and high school. There was not before, and is not now, enough students to run such high-level courses, particularly in Classical music, in every college. Those two or three students in every college who are

interested in advanced study at the pre-tertiary level have been able to come together in a central location without burdening colleges with marginal class sizes and the need for a significant number of specialist teachers. This has always been well understood, and was the whole point of the H-course in the first place, for more than thirty years. Enough students for one or two classes drawn from across the whole ACT. Made sense then, still makes sense now.

1d. Teaching resources

The H-Course concentrated talented music students from all over Canberra in one central location, putting them together with a small number of expert teachers. It was strategic, and efficient. It cannot and will not be able to be replicated in any other form that will be as effective. Resources are committed to the support for talented students in STEM and sports. It is not clear to me at all why the arts are so poorly resourced in general, and why music students should be denied their goals.

2. The short and medium term impact of the 2018 decision to cut funding to the Music for Colleges program.

The short-term impact has already been experienced. I am personally aware of a number of current year 11 students who are deeply distressed that they are not able to continue their music education, particularly in classical music. Again, while there are not that many of them, I'm guessing there would have been more than enough for an H-Course class. There has been demand for this, and will continue to be.

The short and medium term impact is that music in Canberra will be diminished by not having young musicians in our community. Their influence and participation can be hard to discern, but nevertheless important and widespread. In the first instance, colleges will lose the leadership in music that the H-course students provided. Many played in their home schools as part of performances in musical theatre and at other school events. Other avenues of participation have been described in the section 1b, and the absence of young, talented and hardworking musicians will have an impact on all these areas.

The School of Music at ANU is an obvious casualty in both the short and medium term, as the stream of local students able to play at the level required for tertiary study further disappears. The School of Music has struggled with a number of issues over the last few years, low student numbers being among them. The H-course provided students to the School of Music even at its lowest ebb.

Local music organisations will also feel the impact of the absence of those talented young players over time as the musicians available for local orchestras and musical theatre also diminishes. We will lose in our community those senior students who are able to teach at the more junior levels, providing renewal in our private teaching fraternity, as well as the public education system.

3. Options for continuing the program

It is my understanding that the H-course cost \$273,000 per year. For this, our senior and most gifted, talented and hardworking music students got two hours of lectures per week, one hour of performance or aural training, the provision of one or two ensemble performance classes, and a private lesson with an appropriate teacher. At the end, they received a major in music, fully BSSS accredited and suitable for entry into any university in Australia, subject to audition.

In my mind, this is cheap at the price, and given that the light rail came in well under budget, would be easy to fund as is.

The commitment by the ACT government to the resources required to run the H-Course meant that our students graduated from that course with a fully accredited major. This fact appears to have been overlooked when comparing the fewer resources required to run the other ANU extension courses in STEM and languages. From these, students only receive a minor.

However, if savings are to be sought, the cost of the private lessons is an area that could be considered. Most parents with musically able children have supported them through private lessons, and some will be able to continue to do so. Additionally, the amount paid by the H-course to private teachers was below the standard rate, and many asked for that rate to be topped up by parents. Being sole traders or small businesses, these teachers deserve not to have their skills and commitment undervalued, and I am certainly aware of parents who have quietly paid the difference. The private lessons are an essential part of the H-course, and cannot be removed, but cost of providing that component of the program could be managed by asking parents to contribute to the cost of those private lessons. A safety net funding pool could then be established to assist those families for whom such additional funding is too great a financial burden.

It has been said that there are students in the H-course whose parents could afford to pay for the whole thing. Maybe so, but that option was never offered to parents. A part or full user-pays option was never canvassed. To my mind this was an astonishing oversight in the process. There are a number of examples of government-funded activities where a contribution toward the cost is made by parents, up to and including mainstream public education, right through to the tertiary sector. The ANU has very sophisticated systems for the recovery of fees for service. There are several possible mechanisms by which this could have been undertaken. Instead, a course that had been serving the community well for thirty years was axed summarily.

It also seems to me that the ACT government has been very shortsighted in its counting of the cost of this program. Reinstate it and institute a research program that tracks participants over the two years they are members and then several years after. I would suggest that the H-course students have a considerably lower cost to government in terms of alcohol and drug-related health issues, police time, and presentation to counseling services. Music provides the social inclusion the lack of which is at the root of many of society's problems. Music students, for the most part, have purpose and feel fulfilled by what they are doing. As a community we should be counting that benefit.

The funding of the H-Course from the Arts budget, when all the other extension programs were funded through Education, did seem anomalous. A better option would be delivery through the Education portfolio, where there might be people who properly understand the position of the H-course within a wider public education framework.

4. Any other relevant matter

As a parent with a child in year 12 in the excellent ACT public education system, I have noted with pleasure and pride over the last 12 and a half years, the support given to students who both struggle and excel. In many areas of academic achievement as well as sports, teenagers and young adults are supported to achieve their best. In ceasing to fund the H-course the ACT government has done the exact opposite.

The process that resulted in the cessation of the H-course lacked transparency and was beset by rumours and blame-shifting. It was undertaken entirely without consultation with the staff, current or prospective students, or their parents. It is my understanding that the principals and music staffs of the colleges and high schools were not consulted either; a situation that beggars belief. Senior staff at ANU involved in the negotiations seemed to have no idea of the history or the place in the education system and wider community of this important course. Government representatives seemed to see it as merely elitist, despite it being the logical final building block in the whole public education music program. Further, the charge of elitism has not been leveled at any of the other ANU extension courses in STEM subjects or languages. It is impossible to see this secretive process any other way than as a particularly nasty case of tall poppy syndrome, being leveled at young people who just want to play music the best they can, by adults who pay lip service to supporting excellence, both from Government and the ANU. It was, and remains, a dreadful decision of which both the Government and ANU should be ashamed.