



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

---

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS  
Mr Michael Petterson MLA (Chair), Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert MLA (Deputy Chair)  
Mr Mark Parton MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the cessation of the Music  
for Colleges course

**Submission Number: 08**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 28 May 2019**

Submission on Inquiry into the cessation of the Music for Colleges course by The Standing  
Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs

Author: Owen Cooper

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

My name is Owen Cooper, I am a federal public servant, parent and part-time musician. In 2013, I completed one year of the two year 'Music for Colleges' course (now known as the H Course), as an adult. I was highly impressed by the course, and my own playing and understanding of music developed greatly over the year. I would gladly have completed the second year but for the birth of my first child, and I heartily recommended it to other aspiring musicians. So I was shocked and disappointed at the 2018 news that the ACT government had cancelled the course.

The course consisted of a mixture of class room based learning on music theory and music history, music ensembles and individual tuition (one half-hour lesson per week, during term). All teachers on the course, as well as the ensemble leaders and individual tutors, were professional musicians and music educators, considered some of the best in Canberra. In previous years, some Sydney-based musicians from the Conservatorium of Music, teaching on the ANU undergraduate course, would also provide lessons to H course students. The opportunity to learn regularly from these leading professional musicians was invaluable for me, and I can only imagine their effect on the year 11 and 12 students as role models.

The course took advantage of the facilities and resources of the ANU School of Music, which are surely some of the best in Australia, and certainly far ahead of anything that could be offered by any school or private institution in Canberra. ANU provides large, acoustically-treated ensemble rooms, with microphones and amplification systems for bass and guitars, drum kits and tuned pianos; an even larger auditorium for end of term concerts, and scores of private practice/tuition rooms. On a Tuesday evening, these facilities were unused by the tertiary courses, and so it made great sense for them to be used to teach secondary students.

The curriculum was demanding and set high standards, with students needing to complete homework exercises, conduct research and write essays, compose songs and arrangements, learn songs for performances, as well as work for their individual tutors - but my impression was that students were blossoming and thriving under this intensity, rather than suffering. Students were exploring new sounds and ideas in their compositions and applying it to their playing, addressing flaws in their playing technique, and generally making great strides in their development as musicians. Students were making connections with students from other schools, and learning from each other, and they were getting together outside of their course to practice and play together.

Soon after 2013, a decision was made not to allow further adults to attend the course. I believe this was a decision by ANU, possibly to try to reduce competition for its bachelor level course, which at the time had very low attendance; but I am not certain of this, or of the proffered reasons for the decision. As far as I am aware, it was not due to a problem with capacity on the course. I was disappointed by this decision – I think the presence of a few adults helped foster an adult learning environment and modelled strong learning behaviours for the school attendees. I think it also broadened the impact of the course to the wider community. Adults generally do not have many options for music education beyond individual tuition – unless they are willing to commit to a full-time, multi-year bachelor course, which for most of us is financially untenable. The H course, conducted in the evenings, could be completed around the demands of work and family.

A series of reasons have been offered as the explanation for the H Course cancellation. Crucially, I have seen at no time – either in statements, or in released FOI documents – any suggestion that the ACT government was unhappy with the curriculum, teaching objectives, education outcomes, or student experience on the course. And yet the decision was made. Publically, the reasons that I have

seen are that the Course, being offered solely to school students was not in keeping with the ACT arts plan. Under the circumstances, I think it would have been more appropriate for the H course funding and responsibility to be transferred to the Department of Education, which oversees the other H Courses, and the course continued on that basis. Privately, I have been told by several people connected with either ANU or the ACT Government that the ACT Government was unhappy with some aspects of the way ANU was administering the course, and I think this latter explanation is borne out by the FOI documents recently released by ArtsACT. The documents certainly suggest ANU failed to respond in a meaningful way to ArtsACT's concerns. ArtsACT is right to hold ANU to account for this – and I think the relevant Ministers' and officials' failure to publically state their unhappiness with ANU's approach, for fear of damaging the broader relationship with ANU, is misguided. I note that several relevant documents were withheld from FOI publication, which I can only assume held further details of ArtsACT's frustrations or acrimonious relations with ANU. I can only hope that, with a new head of the ANU School of Music, relations can be reset and a new arrangement reached.

I do not have deep familiarity with the replacement programs being offered in lieu of the H Course. I think efforts to encourage more female and indigenous participation are to be applauded – and I'd note that women are severely underrepresented in jazz, particularly as instrumentalists. However, I don't think programs for talented aspiring musicians should be sacrificed in order to achieve this broader outreach. Grassroots sporting clubs and outreach programs work in parallel to talent development programs – and ideally, the former feeds the latter. Our symphony orchestras are not staffed by amateur musicians, and if the ACT wants to ensure that its students are represented in these orchestras and other professional ensembles in the future, we need to have some way of developing promising students' skills and preparing them for tertiary study, if they choose it.

I do have concerns about the way commercial offerings were offered as a purported replacement for the H course, with ANU acting purely as an intermediary, and with apparently no ANU input to the teaching or delivery. Why is ANU lending its imprimatur to these courses, with which it appears to have no professional relationship? I have heard rumours that some senior ANU faculty members have personal connections to at least one of the commercial providers, though I have no idea whether this is accurate. Does ArtsACT really consider that these courses represent good value for money? If so, why not run a tender or student subsidy directly, rather than through ANU? There seems to be very little detail provided to justify the decisions made to spend public money in this way, on these courses, and questions should be asked.

I have also heard rumours that the H course, if it were to return, would probably be a non-accredited course. Although I think a returning H course in any format should be applauded, I think the lack of accreditation would be a real shame. The course is simply too intensive and time consuming, during a student's HSC years for it not be counted towards a student's HSC marks, and to not count it for mere bureaucratic reasons – i.e. an unwillingness to arrange or fund accreditation, rather than any more fundamental problem with the course's curriculum or teaching model – strikes me as lunacy. Finally, I think the \$270,000 per annum spent on the H course represents great value for money per student when it is viewed as an accredited part of higher education. As a non-accredited auxiliary course, I think the value for money proposition may be less clear.

I'll make a few more general comments in closing. Firstly, the ABC's recent 'Don't Stop the Music' program highlighted the clear benefits of music education for students' overall educational

outcomes, as well as their overall wellbeing. If you haven't watched this program yet, I would urge you to do so now. That the ACT would axe its flagship music education program at the same time as the benefits of music education are becoming so apparent seems a particular folly.

Although some H course graduates do not go on to complete higher degrees in music, or to become professional musicians, many do go on to become active members of the ACT's many orchestras, big bands and other performing ensembles, and therefore to make a substantial contribution to the ACT's artistic culture. I am confident that, if you were to survey the ACT-raised members of these groups a majority would be graduates of the H course (or its predecessors). How many other ArtsACT training/education programs can claim this depth of learning or throughput?

I would like to make a brief comment on the perception that auditioned courses for talented music students such as the H Course are 'elitist'. Learning music in Australia is generally not greatly subsidised by state/territory governments and so typically comes at a not-insubstantial cost to parents for instrument hire and tuition. Sadly, I think this means many underprivileged students miss out on the opportunities and benefits of a quality music education. This should be addressed. But I would note that, at least on the 2013 course, almost students all were from ACT public schools, rather than the private system. For parents of students who showed some musical talent and the possibility of a career in music, the H course offered an affordable way to further their musical education within the public school system. With the H course gone, there will be very few options available to these parents. If they have tens of thousands of dollars to spare, they may be able to enrol their children in Canberra Boys/Girls Grammar, which I believe has an excellent music program. For those who can't afford these sorts of school fees, these public school students will have few ways to develop their talents in preparation for tertiary level courses and associated auditions.

I would be happy to discuss any aspect of this submission via phone or email, or to appear in person for the committee.