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Designing Genre-Inclusive Diploma Pathways in Contemporary Theory: A Practice-Led Curriculum Framework for an Independent Awarding Body

Eugene Seow
Lasalle College of the Arts, Singapore
info@eugenseowmusic.com

Abstract

This paper presents the design and critical justification of a genre-inclusive Contemporary Theory diploma suite developed for an independent awarding body. Responding to persistent gaps in post-Grade 8 written-theory provision—particularly the limited accommodation of

jazz, popular, production-based, and world-music literacies—the study proposes a three-level framework (Diploma, Licentiate, Fellowship) that aligns contemporary-theory learning with internationally benchmarked qualification descriptors. Drawing on design-based research and practice-led inquiry, situated within ongoing doctoral work on curriculum innovation, the project treats syllabus authorship as both a creative practice and a scholarly method. Comparative examination of existing structures from ABRSM, Trinity College London, LCME, RSL Awards, and ANZCA informs the new framework’s learning outcomes, task families, and criterion-referenced rubrics, while a Benchmarking Matrix cross-references levels with Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) descriptors and corresponding higher-education (HE) descriptors. Validity is addressed through Messick’s unified model, supported by moderation procedures and sample-marking artefacts. The resulting framework illustrates how independent awarding bodies in the Asia-Pacific region can establish credible, research-informed pathways for contemporary music theory that meet sector expectations for rigour, inclusivity, and transparency. The paper contributes a transferable methodology for curriculum authorship, offering a model that enables diverse institutions to design genre-inclusive qualifications that are pedagogically coherent, culturally responsive, and aligned with international standards.

Key words

curriculum design; contemporary music theory; diploma pathways; design-based research; assessment validity

Introduction

Across many music education systems, written-theory qualifications function as key sites where curricular values, disciplinary assumptions, and institutional histories are expressed (Jorgensen, 2003; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). Yet the majority of post-Grade 8 theory pathways continue to reflect classical-centric epistemologies that prioritise harmonic-functional reasoning, species-derived analytical tools, and literacy models rooted in common-practice tonality (Green, 2002, 2008). While such frameworks remain valuable for classical musicianship, they do not sufficiently represent the knowledge architectures required for contemporary genres, including jazz, popular, film, hybrid media, electronic production, and global traditions (Burnard, 2012). For learners and educators working across these idioms, existing diploma-level theory options offer limited recognition of the analytical, creative, and conceptual fluencies valued in contemporary practice (Barbieri & Varvarigou, 2025; Coppes & Berkers, 2023).

In this article, Contemporary Theory refers to advanced written musicianship study designed for contemporary musical contexts rather than solely for Western common-practice

traditions. It includes conceptual and analytical engagement with harmony, rhythm, form, texture, modality, production practices, stylistic interpretation, and intercultural perspectives across genres such as jazz, popular music, hybrid media, and related idioms. The phrase “independent awarding body” refers to external examining organisations operating outside university degree structures that design, assess, and certify music qualifications for pre-tertiary and lifelong learners. Clarifying these terms is important because the present study concerns the design of a post-Grade 8 written-theory diploma pathway rather than theory pedagogy in the abstract.

This challenge is particularly acute in the Asia-Pacific region, where independent awarding bodies play a significant role in certifying pre-tertiary and lifelong learners (UNESCO, 2019). Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and parts of Australia and New Zealand maintain vibrant ecosystems of teaching studios, private academies, and community providers that rely on external diplomas for progression routes, professional legitimacy, and curricular structure (Campbell, 2004). In these contexts, written-theory diplomas are often interpreted as indicators of disciplinary maturity and as prerequisites for advanced study in performance, pedagogy, or composition. However, most available qualifications draw on inherited classical frameworks that do not fully align with the genre-neutral or genre-diverse realities of contemporary learners.

Comparative scans of major awarding bodies reflect this pattern. The Associated Board

of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) and Trinity College London continue to foreground tonal harmony, counterpoint, and traditional score-analysis models in their Theory and Musicianship pathways (ABRSM, 2023; Trinity College London, 2024). London College of Music Examinations (LCME) has incorporated contemporary musical elements through modular structures, yet its theory provision remains oriented toward classical idioms (London College of Music Examinations, 2023). Rockschool Awards (RSL Awards) provides contemporary and production-focused qualifications, though these pathways primarily emphasise practical and production-oriented competencies rather than extended written-theory analysis (RSL Awards, 2016). The Australian and New Zealand Cultural Arts Limited (ANZCA) includes a broader range of examples across jazz and popular styles, but does not appear to offer an explicit, level-benchmarked diploma route in contemporary theory per se (ANZCA Music Examinations, n.d.). As a result, Asia-Pacific educators seeking rigorous, inclusive, and contemporary-relevant theory qualifications encounter an uneven landscape: rich performance diplomas across genres, but relatively underdeveloped written-theory frameworks beyond Grade 8 (Coppes & Berkers, 2023).

This paper reports on the design of a Contemporary Theory diploma suite comprising three levels: Diploma, Licentiate, and Fellowship, developed for an independent awarding body. The project responds to the need for genre-inclusive, conceptually robust progression routes aligned with contemporary music practice while maintaining the standards expected of

Level 4–7 qualifications within the UK’s Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and corresponding European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) benchmarks (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2018). The framework aims to address four interrelated issues: (1) the lack of post–Grade 8 written-theory pathways centred on contemporary genres; (2) the absence of explicit level descriptors aligned with international qualification frameworks; (3) the limited transparency and validity evidence typically available for written-theory diplomas; and (4) the need for assessment models that recognise diverse ways of demonstrating conceptual understanding, including analytical, creative, contextual, and reflective modes (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Sadler, 1989, 2009). In this study, these are treated as curriculum-design and qualification-architecture issues identified through comparative syllabus analysis and benchmarking, rather than as direct claims about universal learner demand.

The design process draws on principles from design-based research and practice-led inquiry, positioning curriculum authorship itself as a scholarly act (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Nelson, 2013; Schön, 1983). These approaches enable the iterative development of syllabi, task families, rubrics, and moderation procedures as both practice artefacts and research data (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Smith & Dean, 2009). The broader study is part of the author’s ongoing doctoral research on curriculum innovation and the validity of assessment in contemporary

music education. Through a comparative review of existing syllabi from ABRSM, Trinity, LCME, RSL, and ANZCA, the project identifies structural gaps and opportunities for genre-inclusive approaches. These insights inform a modular, research-informed diploma framework accompanied by a Benchmarking Matrix that demonstrates alignment with RQF/EQF/AQF descriptors and higher-education (HE) descriptors (Ofqual, 2008, 2015).

In presenting this framework, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusivity, relevance, and curricular coherence in written theory education (Allsup, 2016; Hess, 2015; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). Rather than positioning contemporary genres as supplementary or enrichment material, the proposed framework centres them as primary sources of conceptual and analytical inquiry (Burnard, 2012; Green, 2008). The design reflects the increasing permeability between formal, informal, and vernacular musicianship practices (Green, 2002; Lebler, 2007) and acknowledges that theory study must evolve in tandem with how musicians learn, create, and work across genres (Parti, 2014). The implications extend beyond any single awarding body: independent organisations, conservatoires, and tertiary institutions in the region may find such models useful when developing contemporary-music theory frameworks that combine cultural responsiveness with internationally recognisable standards (UNESCO, 2012; QAA Scotland, 2022).

The paper proceeds by outlining the conceptual and theoretical background underpinning the design, including perspectives from inclusive and intercultural pedagogy,

curriculum design, constructive alignment, validity theory, and practice-led/instructional design scholarship. It then details the design context and methodological approach before presenting the framework's architecture, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, benchmarking, and validity evidence. The discussion considers the implications for awarding bodies and tertiary educators seeking to establish research-informed practice in contemporary music theory. The conclusion reflects on the framework's contributions and limitations and identifies areas for further inquiry, including examiner calibration, candidate experience studies, and potential cross-board collaboration.

Conceptual and Theoretical Background

Curriculum design for contemporary written theory requires a conceptual foundation that recognises the diversity of musical practices, the multiplicity of learner trajectories, and the need to articulate standards that are both rigorous and inclusive (Burnard, 2012; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). The present framework is informed by four intersecting bodies of scholarship:

- (1) inclusive and intercultural pedagogy, which broadens what counts as legitimate musical knowledge;
- (2) curriculum design theory, particularly conceptual progression and constructive alignment;
- (3) validity theory and international qualification benchmarking; and
- (4) design-based research and practice-led curriculum authorship (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012;

McPhail, 2022; Messick, 1995; Nelson, 2013).

Together, these perspectives support a diploma structure that is genre-inclusive, qualification-aligned, and adaptable across diverse educational settings.

Inclusive and intercultural pedagogy

Scholarship in music education increasingly calls for curricular models that move beyond Eurocentric traditions to embrace the pluralism of contemporary musical life (Campbell, 2004; Small, 1998; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). Green's work on informal and vernacular learning foregrounds the legitimacy of non-notated, participatory, and stylistically diverse practices, challenging the assumption that classical literacy should dominate all pathways (Green, 2002, 2008). Allsup's work on dialogic and open pedagogy similarly frames music education as intercultural, exploratory, and co-constructed (Allsup, 2016). Hess critiques the structural reproduction of Western norms, arguing that curricular inclusivity requires profound epistemic shifts rather than surface diversification (Hess, 2015). Elliott and Silverman's praxial philosophy further situates learning within lived musical action rather than abstract code systems (Elliott & Silverman, 2015).

These perspectives collectively imply that theory qualifications should recognise analytic fluencies across genres, not only classical syntax. Concepts such as groove, timbre, production aesthetics, modality, improvisational logic, and form-as-process are central to contemporary musicianship and merit equivalent status alongside tonal harmony, counterpoint,

or formal analysis (Burnard, 2012). A genre-inclusive curriculum, therefore, requires learning outcomes and assessment tasks that reflect this broader conceptual horizon, enabling learners to articulate understanding through multiple idioms and modes of representation.

Curriculum design, conceptual progression, and constructive alignment

Curriculum scholarship offers critical tools for structuring diploma pathways. McPhail highlights the importance of conceptual progression—building learners’ capacity to think with increasing abstraction, generality, and relational depth (McPhail, 2022). Within diploma systems, this translates into moving from application and explanation at Diploma level (broad conceptual fluency), to analysis and synthesis at Licentiate level (comparative and stylistic reasoning), to evaluation and original contribution at Fellowship level (theorisation and reflective authorship). Biggs’ constructive alignment further emphasises the need for coherence between learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks (Biggs, 1996, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2011). For awarding bodies, this alignment must be explicit, transparent, and demonstrated through task design, rubrics, exemplars, and moderation practices (Brookhart, 2013; Sadler, 2010).

Applied to contemporary theory, these principles support a curriculum model in which conceptual categories (e.g., harmony, rhythm, texture, form, production, intercultural perspectives) scaffold upward in complexity across the three levels (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). For example, while a Diploma candidate may analyse cadential behaviour in pop or jazz

repertoire, a Licentiate candidate might compare cadential logics across genres, and a Fellowship candidate might critique these logics while generating original analytical or pedagogical insights (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018; Posner, 2004). Learning outcomes must therefore encode increasing autonomy, judgement, and methodological independence in ways recognisable within international qualification frameworks (Council of the European Union, 2017; QAA, 2018).

Validity and benchmarking in assessment design

Assessment validity is central to the credibility of qualifications. Messick's unified model remains influential for linking content, substantive, structural, external, and consequential aspects of validity (Messick, 1995). For written-theory diplomas, this means ensuring that tasks genuinely measure the constructs they claim to assess, are structured coherently and transparently, align with external benchmarks such as RQF/EQF/AQF levels, and have educationally defensible consequences for learners and institutions (Newton, 2007; Sadler, 1989, 2009).

Independent awarding bodies frequently face scrutiny regarding level claims, mainly when operating outside regulated systems (Ofqual, 2008, 2015). Explicit benchmarking, therefore, strengthens trust and enables portability of qualifications (Council of the European Union, 2017; European Parliament & Council, 2008; AQF Council, 2013). Cross-walking levels to RQF/EQF/AQF descriptors and to higher-education (HE) descriptors provides

external validation of cognitive demand, learner autonomy, and expected sophistication of reasoning. In contemporary theory, benchmarking further clarifies how non-classical constructs map onto qualification levels: for example, production-analysis tasks may reflect similar cognitive demand to classical harmonic analysis, even if the material and analytical tools differ (Barbieri & Varvarigou, 2025).

Moderation practices also contribute to validity. Transparent criteria, exemplar responses, double-marking protocols, and reflective examiner calibration are essential for maintaining consistency and defensibility (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). For new qualifications, documenting moderation plans and sample-marking exercises provides early evidence that standards can be upheld reliably (Sadler, 2010; Brookhart, 2013). These validity structures are integral to the framework presented in this paper.

Design-based research and practice-led curriculum authorship

Design-based research (DBR) offers a methodology well-suited to curriculum authorship. Originating in the work of Brown and Collins and later consolidated by the Design-Based Research Collective, DBR emphasises iterative, situated design cycles through which theory and practice co-inform each other (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992; Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). DBR is increasingly used in arts education to bridge scholarly insight with real-world application, particularly where innovation and responsiveness are required.

Practice-led research further positions the artefact—the syllabus, task suite, rubric, moderation plan, benchmarking matrix—as both output and data (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013; Smith & Dean, 2009). This dual role acknowledges curriculum authorship as a form of scholarly thinking-in-action, wherein decisions are grounded in disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical reasoning, and reflective judgement (Schön, 1983; Frayling, 1993). Reigeluth and West’s work on instructional design similarly treats design artefacts as expressions of problem-solving processes, embodying theoretical commitments such as inclusivity, progression, and alignment (Reigeluth & Carr-Chellman, 2009; West & Williams, 2017; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Taken together, DBR and practice-led inquiry justify the methodological stance adopted in this paper: the framework is not presented as an empirical study with participants, but as a research-informed design output situated within a broader doctoral inquiry. Its legitimacy derives from theoretical grounding, methodological transparency, evidence from benchmarking, and alignment with international standards (QAA, 2018; UNESCO, 2012).

Methodology

Design context and methodological approach

The curriculum framework presented in this paper was developed within the context of an independent international awarding body that sought to establish credible diploma-level

qualifications in Contemporary Theory. The organisation's prior offerings included performance and pedagogy diplomas in classical and contemporary streams. Still, it lacked written-theory pathways beyond Grade 8 that addressed current practices in jazz, popular, hybrid media, and production-based genres. As in many independent boards active in the Asia-Pacific region, qualifications in theory function both as markers of disciplinary knowledge and as entry points to advanced performance, teaching, or composition diplomas (UNESCO, 2012, 2019). The absence of a genre-inclusive theory risked narrowing the forms of musicianship that could be recognised and credentialed under the awarding body's framework.

To contextualise the design challenge, a preliminary comparative scan of theory pathways across several major examination boards was undertaken. This scan examined the highest available written-theory qualifications, their genre orientation, and the nature of assessment tasks used. The purpose was not to provide a comprehensive comparative study but to identify structural gaps and design opportunities relevant to contemporary written-theory education. Table 1 summarises the main features and limitations identified in this comparative scan.

Table 1 *Comparative overview of selected theory pathways across major awarding bodies*

Awarding Body	Highest Written-Theory Qualification	Genre Orientation	Typical Assessment Focus	Observed Limitation
ABRSM	Grade 8 Theory	Western classical	Harmonic analysis, notation literacy	Limited engagement with contemporary genres
Trinity College London	Advanced Theory Diplomas	Western classical	Counterpoint, tonal analysis, score study	Predominantly classical repertoire focus
London College of Music Examinations (LCME)	DipMusLCM / AMusLCM / LMusLCM Theory	Mixed but classical-leaning	Written analysis, harmonic exercises	Contemporary idioms present but not central
RSL Awards	Contemporary music production syllabus	Popular / contemporary	Applied production theory, stylistic awareness	Focus on production practice rather than extended written-theory analysis
ANZCA	Theory Grades and Diplomas	Mixed repertoire	Written analysis, stylistic discussion	No explicit diploma pathway dedicated specifically to contemporary theory

The insights from this comparative scan informed the design priorities and structural decisions that guided the development of the Contemporary Theory diploma framework in this study.

The development of the Contemporary Theory suite was undertaken through a design-based, practice-led methodology. The innovation in this study lies not in the invention of entirely new musical content, but in integrating genre-inclusive written musicianship,

explicit level benchmarking, criterion-referenced assessment, and moderation structures within a single diploma framework. Rather than treating curriculum development solely as a technical or administrative process, the project conceptualised syllabus authorship, assessment design, benchmarking, and moderation planning as scholarly processes that generate evidence of alignment, relevance, and validity (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Messick, 1995; Sadler, 2010). This stance reflects growing recognition in arts and design education that curriculum design itself is a mode of inquiry, through which conceptual tensions, affordances, and pedagogical commitments become visible (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013; Schön, 1983).

A design-based research orientation

Design-based research (DBR) offers a useful methodological lens for structuring innovation in curriculum work. DBR foregrounds iterative cycles of analysis, design, enactment (or simulation), and reflection (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992; Design-Based Research Collective, 2003), aiming to develop theoretically grounded yet pragmatically robust solutions to educational challenges (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). In this project, DBR provided the scaffolding for generating, evaluating, and refining the diploma framework.

The work proceeded through four interconnected design cycles:

1. Problem analysis and baseline review

The first cycle focused on clarifying the conceptual and structural gaps in existing post-Grade

8 theory pathways. A comparative scan of syllabi from ABRSM, Trinity College London, London College of Music Examinations (LCME), RSL Awards, and ANZCA examined their stated learning outcomes, assessment tasks, genre inclusivity, and level claims (ABRSM, 2023; Trinity College London, 2024; London College of Music Examinations, 2023; RSL Awards, 2016; ANZCA Music Examinations, n.d.). This analysis highlighted limitations in conceptual progression, contemporary music representation, and transparency of level alignment, and it informed the preliminary structure of a genre-inclusive Contemporary Theory pathway.

2. Internal alignment and framework construction

Drawing on the insights from Cycle 1, the second cycle involved drafting learning outcomes, task families, and assessment rubrics for Diploma, Licentiate, and Fellowship levels. Biggs' constructive alignment served as a conceptual guide, ensuring coherence between intended learning outcomes, task demands, and criteria (Biggs, 1996, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Multiple drafts were produced, with particular attention to balancing analytical, contextual, and creative expectations across genres.

3. External benchmarking and validity evidence

The third cycle cross-walked the draft framework with international qualification descriptors. A Benchmarking Matrix was developed to map the three diploma levels to RQF/EQF/AQF cognitive-demands, autonomy indicators, and HE outcomes (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017; QAA, 2018). Messick's unified theory of validity informed the

evaluation of content and structural coherence, supported by draft moderation procedures and exemplar-marking artefacts (Messick, 1995; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989, 2009).

These processes generated early evidence of defensible level claims.

4. Reflective synthesis and framework consolidation

The final cycle synthesised feedback from internal review, benchmarking analysis, and design reflection. Rubrics were refined, task prompts clarified, and moderation strategies adjusted, drawing on principles of criterion-referenced assessment and standards-based judgement (Brookhart, 2013; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Sadler, 2010). The aim was to stabilise a framework that was pedagogically inclusive, analytically rigorous, and recognisably aligned to international standards.

Throughout these cycles, the artefacts created—syllabi, task suites, rubrics, exemplar responses, moderation plans, and benchmarking tables—functioned simultaneously as products and data. Following practice-led research traditions, the iterative shaping of these artefacts generated insight into the kinds of conceptual work required for contemporary-theory learning, the ways genre inclusivity challenges representational traditions, and the affordances and limitations of existing assessment ecologies (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013; Smith & Dean, 2009).

Data sources and analytic methods

Although no human participants were involved in this study, the methodological approach

drew on rich documentary and artefactual data. These data sources included published syllabi and specification documents from five major awarding bodies; RQF, EQF, AQF, and HE-level descriptors (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017; European Parliament & Council, 2008; Ofqual, 2008, 2015; QAA, 2018); internally generated curriculum artefacts such as learning outcomes, task prototypes, and rubrics; moderation plans and calibration notes; and reflective memos documenting rationale, decision-making, and design tensions across cycles (Schön, 1983; Sullivan, 2010).

Analysis followed two intertwined modes: descriptive comparison (to map structural features, genre coverage, conceptual progression, and assessment types across existing boards), and principled alignment (to evaluate whether the emerging diploma framework satisfied the criteria articulated by DBR, inclusive pedagogy, validity theory, and qualification benchmarking) (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Hess, 2015; Messick, 1995). The latter mode required interpretive judgement: aligning contemporary-music constructs (e.g., production analysis, stylistic transcription, intercultural contextualisation) with level descriptors historically written for classical or general education contexts (McPhail, 2022; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017).

Situating the study within ongoing doctoral research

This design study forms part of a broader doctoral research programme on curriculum

innovation and the validity of assessment in contemporary music education. The APJAE article presents one major strand of that programme: the conceptualisation and design of diploma-level pathways for contemporary theory. While empirical evaluation of candidate experience, examiner calibration, and moderation reliability lies beyond the present scope, the design outputs documented here establish an essential foundation for subsequent phases of doctoral inquiry (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Black & Wiliam, 2009).

The methodological stance adopted—DBR informed by practice-led inquiry—supports the dual aim of producing academically defensible curriculum frameworks while generating transferable insights for awarding bodies in the Asia-Pacific region (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013). The next section details the structure, content, and rationale of the Contemporary Theory framework emerging from these design cycles.

Results

The comparative scan identified three recurring gaps across the examined pathways: limited diploma-level written-theory provision for contemporary genres, uneven transparency of level alignment, and a tendency for contemporary pathways to privilege applied or creative activity over extended analytical demonstration. These observations provided the immediate design rationale for the framework presented below.

The contemporary theory framework: structure, learning outcomes, and assessment

design

Building on the gaps identified in the comparative scan, the framework was structured to address progression, benchmarking transparency, and broader modes of conceptual demonstration within written-theory assessment. The Contemporary Theory diploma suite consists of three progressive levels—Diploma, Licentiate, and Fellowship—each characterised by increasing conceptual sophistication, autonomy, and analytical or creative independence. The framework is designed to centre contemporary genres, maintain alignment with RQF/EQF/AQF level descriptors, and support transparent validity claims through task families, rubrics, exemplars, and moderation planning (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017; QAA, 2018).

Architectural overview

The Diploma functions as an entry-level qualification for learners transitioning beyond Grade 8 theory or musicianship. It establishes core concepts in contemporary harmonic, rhythmic, textural, and production-based analysis, reflecting the conceptual expansion advocated in contemporary and popular-music theory research (Coppes & Berkers, 2023). The Licentiate extends this foundation through comparative, stylistic, and idiomatic reasoning (McPhail, 2022), while the Fellowship emphasises originality, criticality, and reflective authorship consistent with practice-led and research-informed expectations at Level 7 (Nelson, 2013; Schön, 1983). Across all levels, genre inclusivity is embedded not as optional enrichment but

as the structural basis of task design (Burnard, 2012; Green, 2002, 2008).

Learning outcomes and conceptual progression

Learning outcomes articulate increasing depth and independence across the three levels:

Diploma outcomes emphasise explanation and application. Learners demonstrate foundational fluency in concepts such as harmonic function across genres, groove and rhythmic layering, form and sectionality in pop and jazz, production elements in hybrid media, and intercultural contextual awareness (Green, 2008).

Licentiate outcomes shift toward analysis, comparison, and stylistic reasoning. Candidates evaluate structural features within and across genres, compare modality, harmony, and production logics, and apply analytical approaches to interpret idioms or compositional practices (Partti, 2014; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017).

Fellowship outcomes centre evaluation, originality, and reflective authorship. Candidates critique theoretical models, justify methodological choices, generate original analyses or curriculum artefacts, and situate their work within broader scholarly or professional discourses (Nelson, 2013; Barrett & Bolt, 2007).

These progression patterns are intentionally aligned with RQF Levels 4, 6, and 7 (and corresponding EQF/AQF levels), ensuring that cognitive demand increases in abstraction, relational depth, and autonomy (Council of the European Union, 2017; AQF Council, 2013; QAA, 2018).

Assessment design: task families

The framework uses four task families, each corresponding to a cluster of conceptual demands.

These were selected to assess knowledge across contemporary genres and to reflect multiple modes of musicianship (analytical, creative, contextual, reflective), consistent with praxial and learner-centred models of music education (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Lebler, 2007).

Task family A: analytical tasks

These tasks assess harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, textural, and structural understanding in diverse idioms. Examples include: analysing harmonic and modal pathways from jazz, neo-soul, or pop; identifying rhythmic functions in groove-based repertoires; mapping form and gestural logic in film or hybrid media cues; and interpreting production or sound-design choices as structural signals (Coppes & Berkers, 2023; Partti, 2014).

Task family B: creative-to-a-brief tasks

These assess compositional, arranging, or production decisions linked to conceptual constructs. Examples include: arranging a lead sheet to a stylistic brief; reharmonising a section using contemporary vocabulary; and designing a short production template to highlight textural or spatial concepts.

These tasks recognise creative practice as a form of conceptual demonstration, consistent with praxial approaches to music education (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Barrett & Bolt, 2007).

Task family C: contextual-reflective writing

Candidates respond to prompts requiring them to articulate stylistic, cultural, or technological contexts. Examples include: comparing analytical approaches across genres; discussing intercultural considerations in theoretical interpretation (Hess, 2015; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017); and evaluating the relevance of analytical constructs to contemporary practice.

These tasks operationalise diversity and intercultural awareness within the qualification (Campbell, 2004; Small, 1998).

Task family D: portfolio and oral components (fellowship only)

At Fellowship level, candidates produce a portfolio comprising original analyses, reflective commentaries, and (optionally) educational or compositional artefacts. A short viva or oral explanation may accompany the submission, enabling demonstration of reflective judgement and methodological self-awareness (Nelson, 2013; Schön, 1983).

Rubrics and criterion-referenced assessment

Criterion-referenced rubrics are central to the framework's defensibility. Rubrics articulate expectations across: accuracy and coherence of analysis; stylistic and idiomatic understanding; conceptual depth and abstraction; comparative and critical reasoning; substantiation and quality of argumentation; and originality and reflective insight (Fellowship).

The use of rubrics draws on long-established research in assessment that emphasises transparency, reliability, and explicit criteria (Brookhart, 2013; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). The

rubrics intentionally avoid privileging classical-notation literacy or harmonic-function syntax as default indicators of competence. Instead, they foreground conceptual understanding and the ability to articulate reasoning using appropriate genre languages (Hickey, 1999; Sadler, 1989, 2010).

Benchmarking and validity evidence

To support validity claims, the framework includes a Benchmarking Matrix that maps each level's learning outcomes and task demands to RQF/EQF/AQF descriptors and higher-education (HE) descriptors (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017).

Table 2 *Benchmarking matrix for Contemporary Theory qualifications*

Contemporary Theory Level	External Comparator(s)	Framework Alignment	Learning Outcome Focus	Indicative Tasks	Autonomy / Judgement	Externality / Moderation
Diploma	Trinity ATCL (Performance); ANZCA Diploma; selected Level 4–5 contemporary-music qualifications	RQF 4–5; EQF 5; AQF 6; HE Level 4–5 equivalence	Apply theoretical concepts to stylistic analysis; demonstrate harmonic and rhythmic fluency	Short analytical commentaries; harmonic exercises; arranging to a brief; oral explanation tasks	Works under guidance; emerging independence	Double-marking; criterion-referenced rubric; internal moderation
	Trinity LTCL (Performance); ANZCA Associate Diploma; Level 6 HE descriptors (final-year undergraduate equivalence)	RQF 6; EQF 6; AQF 7; HE Level 6 equivalence	Integrate analytical and stylistic concepts across genres; demonstrate comparative insight	Extended analysis; comparative essay; contextual rationale; portfolio-based reasoning	Operates independently; justifies stylistic and structural choices	Annotated exemplars; peer moderation
Fellowship	Trinity FTCL (Performance); ANZCA Fellowship; Level 7 HE descriptors (Master’s-level equivalence)	RQF 7; EQF 7; AQF 8–9; HE Level 7 equivalence	Produce research-informed theoretical argumentation; demonstrate innovation and intercultural	Extended analytical study; portfolio commentary; case study; design-based artefact creation	Exercises authoritative, original judgement	External examiner review; cross-institutional moderation

Contemporary Theory Level	External Comparator(s)	Framework Alignment	Learning Outcome Focus	Indicative Tasks	Autonomy / Judgement	Externality / Moderation
awareness						

Note. ATCL = Associate of Trinity College London; LTCL = Licentiate of Trinity College London; FTCL = Fellow of Trinity College London.

Table 2 summarises the cross-framework benchmarking for the Contemporary Theory qualifications. It indicates that the Diploma, Licentiate, and Fellowship levels broadly correspond to RQF 4–5/6/7, respectively (and their EQF/AQF equivalents). Each level indicates rising cognitive demand, autonomy, and evaluative depth, while the columns demonstrate how outcomes, task types, and moderation processes adjust to sustain validity and transparency across levels. These correspondences are presented as benchmark alignments rather than claims of formal RQF registration, clarifying equivalence without implying regulated status.

Messick’s facets of validity are addressed through several complementary design features within the framework (Messick, 1995). Content validity is supported through alignment with contemporary genre practices and relevant curriculum literature (McPhail, 2022). Substantive validity is reflected in the use of rubrics and task families that mirror authentic conceptual work in contemporary music contexts (Barbieri & Varvarigou, 2025). Structural validity is operationalised through constructive alignment and progressive task

complexity across diploma levels (Biggs, 1996, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2011). External validity is addressed through benchmarking against international qualification frameworks, including the Australian Qualifications Framework, the European Qualifications Framework, and related higher-education (HE) descriptors (AQF Council, 2013; European Parliament & Council, 2008). Finally, consequential validity is considered in relation to the framework's potential effects on learner progression, institutional recognition, and assessment transparency (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Newton, 2007).

Moderation structures include double-marking protocols, exemplar scripts, standardisation notes, and reflective examiner calibration processes (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Together, these mechanisms contribute early evidence of reliability and transparency, which are essential for the recognition of new qualifications (Sadler, 2010; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

Rationale and implications for contemporary music education

The design outcomes presented here demonstrate how a diploma suite in Contemporary Theory can balance genre inclusivity, analytical rigour, and qualification alignment. By treating contemporary idioms as central rather than peripheral, the framework challenges traditional hierarchies in theory education and offers pathways that more closely reflect current musical practice (Burnard, 2012; Green, 2008).

Furthermore, the methodological approach—combining design-based research (DBR),

practice-led inquiry, and benchmarking—offers a potentially transferable model for awarding bodies, tertiary institutions, and curriculum designers working in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Nelson, 2013; UNESCO, 2012, 2019). For institutions seeking research-informed, culturally responsive, and genre-inclusive theory curricula, such frameworks may offer one possible direction for curriculum innovation (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017).

Discussion and Implications

The framework presented in this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about curriculum relevance, inclusivity, and qualification alignment within contemporary music education (Burnard, 2012). Its development reiterates the need for written-theory pathways that reflect the diverse competencies required of musicians working across popular, jazz, hybrid media, electronic production, and intercultural traditions (Campbell, 2004; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). This section discusses the broader implications of the design outcomes, particularly for awarding bodies, tertiary institutions, and educators in the Asia-Pacific region.

Repositioning written theory within contemporary musicianship

A central implication of this study lies in how written theory is conceptualised. Traditional post-Grade 8 theory curricula often assume that analytical and conceptual literacy is best demonstrated through classical notation, functional harmony, species-derived counterpoint, or

formal analysis derived from the common-practice repertoire (Green, 2008). While these remain essential musical literacies, they represent only one segment of contemporary musicianship. The proposed framework positions written theory not as the study of a single dominant epistemology but as an engagement with multiple conceptual systems—modal, harmonic, rhythmic, timbral, technological, intercultural—across genres (Burnard, 2012; Small, 1998).

This repositioning expands what undergraduate bridging programmes, diploma educators, and private-sector instructors can expect from written-theory study. It also challenges the implicit hierarchy that situates contemporary genres as less suitable for conceptual articulation (Coppes & Berkers, 2023; Hess, 2015). The design shows that analytical sophistication is not the exclusive domain of classical music; instead, each genre offers unique conceptual tools that can be assessed with rigour and transparency (Green, 2002; Elliott & Silverman, 2015).

Practical implications for awarding bodies

For awarding bodies, particularly those operating independently of national regulatory structures, the framework offers several practical contributions. First, it strengthens the clarity of level claims. Explicit Benchmarking Matrices enable awarding bodies to make transparent and defensible claims about qualification levels by aligning diploma outcomes with RQF, EQF, and AQF descriptors (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017; QAA, 2018).

Such alignment supports institutional credibility, facilitates recognition by higher education providers, and assists learners and educators in interpreting the standing of qualifications within broader qualification ecosystems.

Second, the framework supports genre-inclusive task design. The task families outlined in the diploma structure provide adaptable templates for assessments that reflect real-world musicianship rather than narrowly defined stylistic traditions (Coppes & Berkers, 2023). Awarding bodies can adopt or adapt these task structures to broaden their theoretical offerings while maintaining continuity with existing classical-oriented theory frameworks.

Third, the framework demonstrates how structured validity evidence can be generated within independent qualification systems. By mapping task demands, learning outcomes, moderation procedures, and exemplar scripts to Messick's unified model of validity, the framework illustrates how awarding bodies can document defensible relationships between assessment design, evaluation criteria, and learning progression (Messick, 1995; Sadler, 2010; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). This approach provides a practical model for strengthening claims of rigour and transparency within independent certification systems.

Finally, the framework outlines moderation and standardisation strategies that can support assessment reliability. Calibration processes, exemplar-marking packs, and double-marking procedures offer replicable mechanisms for quality assurance across examiners and cohorts (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). These

procedures directly address a long-standing critique of independent examination systems—namely, the risk of inconsistency in marking practices and assessment reliability (Newton, 2007; Sadler, 1989).

Because independent awarding bodies in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia frequently serve diverse learner populations—including adult musicians, crossover artists, and students preparing for tertiary entry—these implications may be particularly relevant across such sectors (UNESCO, 2019).

Curriculum design implications for tertiary and pre-tertiary institutions

The framework provides a model for institutions seeking to redesign or expand contemporary theory offerings. Three implications are particularly relevant. First, the alignment with higher-education (HE) descriptors supports clearer articulation into undergraduate and postgraduate pathways. Diploma graduates are positioned to enter tertiary study with appropriate conceptual grounding, addressing concerns sometimes expressed by HE institutions regarding the uneven preparedness of applicants from independent theory routes.

Second, the framework strengthens pedagogical coherence by encouraging educators to organise learning around conceptual progression rather than isolated genre categories. Through constructive alignment, transferable concepts—such as harmonic function across idioms, form as process, and production as structural logic—can structure theory curricula in ways that connect analytical understanding across diverse musical styles (Biggs & Tang, 2011; McPhail,

2022; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Third, the framework foregrounds inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. The contextual-reflective tasks embedded within the qualification signal that theoretical understanding is inseparable from cultural interpretation and stylistic literacy (Hess, 2015; Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017). Such approaches encourage pedagogies that recognise diverse musical backgrounds and learner identities within contemporary music education (Campbell, 2004; Small, 1998).

Implications for the Asia-Pacific region

Strong private-sector teaching ecosystems, reliance on external examination boards, and diverse cultural expectations about what constitutes musical knowledge continue to shape music education across the Asia-Pacific region (UNESCO, 2012, 2019). Within this context, contemporary and culturally responsive credentials may become increasingly relevant as learners engage with global genres, digital production, and hybrid artistic practices (Partti, 2014). The framework responds to these regional conditions in three related ways.

First, it provides a qualification structure that more explicitly recognises contemporary and intercultural competencies within written-theory assessment (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017; Campbell, 2004). Second, it demonstrates how independent awarding bodies can articulate learning outcomes in ways that align with international standards even in the absence of national regulation (AQF Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2017). Third, it

offers a transparent design model that may be adapted in contexts where credential pathways remain institutionally important (UNESCO, 2019; QAA Scotland, 2022).

An important implication is that awarding bodies in East and Southeast Asia need not rely exclusively on Western classical frameworks to ensure credibility. Instead, they can develop research-informed, locally relevant qualifications while maintaining global portability through benchmarking (European Parliament & Council, 2008).

Methodological implications

The adoption of a design-based research (DBR) and practice-led methodology demonstrates the viability of treating curriculum authorship as a form of scholarly inquiry (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Nelson, 2013). Three methodological implications are especially significant.

First, the study shows that artefacts such as syllabi, task prompts, rubrics, and moderation protocols can serve as legitimate research data, capturing the decision-making processes and theoretical assumptions embedded in curriculum design (Smith & Dean, 2009; Schön, 1983).

Second, it demonstrates that validity need not be treated solely as a post hoc evaluative concern; rather, it can be developed iteratively through design cycles in which benchmarking and moderation are integrated from the outset (Messick, 1995; Boud & Falchikov, 2006).

Third, the approach suggests a degree of scalability and transferability, since similar

methods could be adopted by other awarding bodies and institutions seeking to develop genre-inclusive curricula in performance, composition, or music production (UNESCO, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper outlines the design and justification for a diploma suite in Contemporary Theory that seeks to broaden what constitutes assessable theoretical knowledge in music education. By centring contemporary genres and integrating analytical, creative, and contextual modes of assessment, the framework addresses long-standing gaps in post-Grade 8 theory pathways, particularly within regions where independent awarding bodies hold significant influence (Coppes & Berkers, 2023).

Through the combined use of design-based research, practice-led inquiry, and qualification benchmarking, the study demonstrates how curriculum authorship can function as a rigorous method for generating valid, transparent, and internationally aligned qualifications (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Nelson, 2013). The resulting framework offers both a concrete model for Contemporary Theory diplomas and a research-informed approach to curriculum design responsive to contemporary musical practice (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017).

Three contributions are particularly noteworthy. First, the framework repositions written theory as a multi-idiomatic, conceptually rich domain that reflects the diverse practices of modern musicians (Burnard, 2012; Green, 2008). Second, it supports transparent validity

claims through constructive alignment, rubric design, moderation planning, and benchmarking with RQF/EQF/AQF and higher-education (HE) descriptors (Messick, 1995; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Third, it offers a clear structure—Diploma, Licentiate, Fellowship—through which learners can progress from foundational fluency to critical and original inquiry (McPhail, 2022; Nelson, 2013).

However, several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The framework has not yet been empirically evaluated with candidates or examiners; future research should investigate learner experiences, assess the reliability of marking procedures, and explore examiner calibration in greater depth (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). In addition, while the benchmarking matrix aligns closely with international standards, it does not replace the need for ongoing sectoral consultation, the refinement of task exemplars, or periodic review as musical practices evolve (QAA, 2018; UNESCO, 2019).

Despite these limitations, the framework offers a potentially useful model for awarding bodies and institutions across the Asia-Pacific region seeking to advance culturally responsive, genre-inclusive, and academically credible theory curricula. It highlights the potential of design-based and practice-led methodologies to generate qualifications that align with the realities of contemporary musicianship while maintaining the rigour necessary for formal recognition (Nelson, 2013; Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). As music education continues to diversify, such frameworks may become increasingly useful for ensuring that conceptual and

analytical literacies evolve in tandem with creative and cultural practice (Westerlund & Karlsen, 2017; Partti, 2014).

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