



Stand Up Stand Out

Case study as part of an evaluation of Auckland Council's investment into Arts and Culture in Auckland.

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Mihi and acknowledgement

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Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa.

This case study forms part of a broader evaluation of the Value of Auckland Council's investment in the arts and culture sector. This project was commissioned and funded by Auckland Council.

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Stand Up Stand Out: Background

About Stand Up Stand Out

Stand Up Stand Out (SUSO) is an annual secondary school performance competition led by Auckland Council that welcomes a wide range of performing arts disciplines. Performances include vocal, instrumental, band, dance, original compositions, and more recently, electronic music. SUSO started as one of the foundational programmes developed by the Ōtara Music and Arts Centre (OMAC), driven by the advocacy of Māori and Pacific students from Hillary College in South Auckland. The programme continues to champion the Māori and Pacific cultural values it was founded on: mātauranga, whakawhanaungatanga, and manaakitanga.

Now in operation for over 35 years, SUSO has grown into a regional programme that remains deeply rooted in South Auckland, with competition heats held in Auckland Council venues across south, east and west Auckland districts. The competition runs annually, opening entries in May, with preliminary heats in August. To generate school engagement, SUSO opens entries each year by reaching out to music teachers and Heads of Departments through its school database and uses social media to improve visibility and access for schools without existing ties to the programme.

Alongside its reputation as a platform for Māori and Pacific rangatahi, the programme also serves as a space for creative exploration, fostering a culture of excellence among young performers, including those who may face barriers to pursuing their artistic aspirations. Participants gain live performance experience during heats and finals, building technical skills, emotional regulation, and confidence in engaging with audiences. All performers receive immediate, practical feedback from the judging panel to guide their creative progression, while those presenting original compositions may be selected for professional recording opportunities at Auckland Council's OMAC studios.

Alumni are regularly invited to paid performance opportunities at Auckland Council and Auckland Live run festivals, including Music in Parks and the dedicated SUSO performance in the Summer in the Square events, which help them transition into professional creative practice. Students are also connected with organisations such as the Pacific Music Awards and others aligned with their artistic practice, strengthening their networks and supporting continued development beyond the competition.

The programme's long-standing coordinator sees SUSO as more than a competition, offering a formative 'arts experience' that nurtures creative growth and experimentation, and scaffolds participants into creative careers as performers, musicians, technicians, and educators.

"I grew up in South Auckland, so I knew talent was abundant... this concentration of elite talent... and largely what I've done in the last 13 years is introduce things that hopefully increases the likelihood of more young people converting to successful careers in the creative sector."

- Gene Rivers, Programme



Stand Up Stand Out: Working in partnership to deliver value through investment

SUSO demonstrates how relatively modest but well-targeted council investment can be maximised through strong partnerships, enabling high production value and meaningful pathways for young artists. Its growth over time reflects a responsive design approach that keeps the programme relevant to the evolving interests of rangatahi.

Operational funding

Stand Up Stand Out operates on an annual Auckland Council investment of \$84,000, which covers its full operational budget and enables the programme to be delivered free of charge to all participants. Investment in SUSO has grown significantly since 2012, when the programme received just \$8,000-\$12,000 in funding and relied on participant entry fees to meet fiscal demands.

The gradual increase in financial investment reflects both the rising number of students and schools participating and the programme's expanding reputation as a 'must-do' competition on the secondary school calendar. This is supported by the annual review and widening of its categories to reflect the changing interests of young creatives.

Strategic partnerships

Coordinators emphasise the importance of SUSO's ability to maintain high production value within a constrained fiscally responsible environment by activating key partnerships across the arts and music ecosystem. Venue partnerships with Auckland Live ensure high-standard production values in central city venues such as the Auckland Town Hall and Concert Chamber, while heats are hosted across Auckland Council-owned facilities including Te Oro, Ōtara Music and Arts Centre, and Roskill Youth Zone. Resource partnerships add further value, with Serato providing free software licences for electronic music participants and RockShop contributing equipment and prizes. Industry partnerships connect students with respected artists and arts educators on the judging panel, who act as critics, mentors and role models, while also linking young people to professional networks such as Te Karanga Trust, the Pacific Music Awards and more recently Aesium Music House.

SUSO also leverages partnerships across Auckland Council to extend pathways into paid and professional opportunities for alumni. These include collaborations with regional arts and culture programmes such as Music in Parks, the Parnell Festival of Roses and Ka Mua Ka Muri, a live and digital performance series filmed in Auckland Central Library's basement space. Alumni are also programmed into events like Summer in the Square, the Pasifika Festival and other public performances delivered by Auckland Live and Tātaki Auckland Unlimited as a result of industry partnerships through SUSO.

"SUSO is part of an ecosystem, it sits with the connections we have, with our judges, it's the people we bring in... everyone has that same ownership of what we do at SUSO and wanting to help the young artists."

- Gavin Downie, Production Lead

Finally, the intentional curation of SUSO's crew and judging panel is key to shaping the programme's unique culture and energy. They come from the same communities as the participants, bringing both professional expertise and a shared cultural understanding that fosters organic mentoring relationships grounded in care and passion for the performing arts.

Prioritising community aspirations and mātauranga in design

SUSO is a responsively designed initiative that reflects the aspirations and needs of its young artist community, especially Māori and Pacific rangatahi. Although the programme has expanded over time, it remains firmly grounded in the cultural values that shaped its original vision. For staff and participants of SUSO, a standout feature of the programme's design is its celebration of culture and diversity. All creative expressions are welcomed and celebrated within the same competition categories, without the need for culturally specific segments.

“Because it exists as a platform that was effectively created by our people for our people, it just feels different... everyone's included, and everyone wins because of it.”

- Gene Rivers, Programme Lead

This inclusive approach is also reflected in the wide range of performance genres supported by the competition. SUSO adapts its categories each year in response to the creative interests of its participants. The addition of the SUSO electronic category for example, ensures that SUSO remains reflective of the diversity of young artistic practice entering the competition each year, from beat-making to opera. By designing in partnership with communities and staying responsive to their aspirations, Auckland Council demonstrates good stewardship of resources by ensuring investment remains relevant, inclusive, and impactful for those it is intended to serve.

“SUSO has really evolved since the beginning... really listening to the rangatahi and meeting them where they are with popular culture... that it's not just playing the piano and writing a song, it's making beats and that's the way that things are moving.”

- Cherie Mathieson, SUSO



Stand Up Stand Out: Building artistic, social and cultural capital

SUSO builds artistic, social, and cultural capital by bridging secondary education with the creative industries, providing young people with professional-level experiences and networks often unavailable in school settings. The competition develops artistic skill and confidence while also fostering community, inclusivity, and pathways into creative careers for the next generation of artists.

Bridging secondary education with the creative industry

Teachers involved in SUSO describe the programme as delivering learning opportunities that extend far beyond what is typically available in a secondary school setting. It offers early and realistic exposure to the demands of creative career pathways, supporting students to develop the resilience, preparedness, and adaptability needed to manage the pressures that define work in the creative industries. Through its simulation of professional environments, SUSO equips participants with practical experience in live performance, technical production, and industry etiquette, while teaching young people to receive and apply feedback.

“It does get more difficult, there's more critique as you progress and as you make it through each heat. It's all part of that growing process and then coming out of SUSO, being able apply those skills.”

- Gavin Downie, Production Lead

“It's very easy, especially at a young age, to feel overwhelmed... It's a cutthroat industry and a lot of those lessons I learnt through SUSO have really helped me a lot as I have progressed.”

- Arjuna Oakes, SUSO alumni

While structured as a competition, teachers emphasised that SUSO is equally a learning experience designed to complement the secondary school environment. It is open to all students, regardless of skill level or career aspirations, and focuses on creating positive performance experiences that build confidence and encourage ongoing artistic development.

Building a creative community for young adults

SUSO was praised by evaluation participants for its strong sense of community. Alumni highlighted the uniqueness of the competition, seen in how contestants from different schools support and encourage one another and are less focused on individual success. The programme facilitates cross-pollination of regional and multicultural talent, helping participants to build lasting networks with fellow young creatives. For all alumni interviewed, this peer connection has continued beyond the competition, with many going on to collaborate with other SUSO alumni on creative projects.

“Community is the key thing in any musical environment that supports growth. Having access to community early as a creative is massive.”

- Cherie Mathieson, SUSO Judge

While not formally offered as part of the SUSO programme, informal mentoring relationships have emerged between judges and participants beyond the competition. In several cases, these connections have supported young artists to take their next steps in their careers.

“Now that I'm friends with these other artists who already release music and are pretty well known in Auckland, they will sometimes ask me to open for their shows or pull up for a gig that they want to do.”

- Jazmin Ugapo (Juga), SUSO alumni

Improving rangatahi arts participation

SUSO is recognised for its inclusivity, making arts participation accessible to a wide range of rangatahi across Tāmaki Makaurau. Students can enter the competition even if their school has no prior relationship with the programme, a process alumni describe as straightforward and often the catalyst for future participation by other students from their school. The programme also improves access by embracing a wide range of musical and cultural practices. SUSO welcomes original compositions, cover songs, and culturally specific forms of expression, fostering a space where diverse styles and interests are celebrated and judged equally.



Solo Category performers at Stand Up Stand Out Finals 2024

“Individuality is celebrated. There are no boxes that you have to stay within, and I think creativity needs that fluidity.”

- Erin Geraghty (Erin G), SUSO alumni

SUSO actively supports equitable participation for Māori and Pacific communities. Teachers and programme staff acknowledge that additional systems and support are required to ensure these students receive the same level of visibility and opportunity as their peers who may benefit from extra creative resources in higher decile schools, pre-existing connections to the creative industries and whānau support. This approach creates opportunities for equitable participation and plays a role in shifting perceptions of the arts as a legitimate potential pathway for Māori and Pacific rangatahi.

“The creative industries being a legitimate pathway is not recognised on a whānau level... SUSO opens those pathways.”

- Manurewa High School Teacher

Supporting SUSO alumni into creative careers

SUSO has played a formative role in the creative careers of many of its alumni. Interviews with past participants identified SUSO as a key turning point in their professional journey, particularly through opportunities such as recording original songs. For all interviewees in this evaluation, this was their first time accessing a professional studio environment and receiving technical support from paid engineers.

“They helped me record my first unofficial EP when I was 17... It was my first time recording in a studio with a paid audio engineer... that allowed me to do quite a bit after that. Gene got me a job at OMAC teaching piano and I developed my practice as a music teacher.

- Arjuna Oakes, SUSO alumni

Programme staff and judges have observed a rising calibre of talent among participants progressing through the competition each year. One clear indicator of SUSO’s growing influence is the increasing presence of alumni performing on festival stages across Aotearoa, signalling the programme’s role in nurturing the next generation of artists.

Several alumni credited SUSO with providing exposure to industry opportunities, leading to meaningful career pathways and collaborations as they become more established in their career. By embedding guest performances and engagement with industry personnel in the competition programme, long-term opportunities have emerged for some participants. For Soakai Malamala, performing on the SUSO stage enabled his discovery and he is now a touring band member of legendary reggae band Three Houses Down:

“SUSO has been a launching pad for a lot of us... it showed me that there is a life for a musician here in Aotearoa and even outside of Aotearoa. Through Three Houses Down, I've been to Canada, we went to L.A, we've been all the way up from the top of the North Island right down to Invercargill... I attribute that to SUSO.”

- Soakai Malamala, SUSO alumni and secondary school.

Stand Up Stand Out: Delivering value for the people of Tāmaki Makaurau

SUSO's alumni culture contributes to Auckland's broader cultural vitality by fostering pride, visibility, and long-term engagement in young musicians. As part of Auckland's designation as a UNESCO City of Music, SUSO reinforces the city's commitment to preserving and investing in its musical and cultural identity and brings communities together to celebrate artistic expression.

Creating an alumni culture of excellence

According to staff, SUSO cultivates an alumni culture and a reputation for excellence that carries weight within the creative industries. It was felt that SUSO was initially met with quiet resistance as a platform primarily for Māori and Pacific rangatahi in South Auckland; there is a clear view that SUSO has since then overcome early prejudice to become a recognised and valued part of the city's creative industry. Their goal is to ensure that association with SUSO becomes a mark of quality that opens doors for young musicians as they move into their careers. This sense of excellence and shared pride contributes to Auckland's cultural identity, signalling that the city is a place where talent is recognised and celebrated.

“We're wanting to establish a reputation of excellence of Tāmaki musicians so that every young musician that comes out of Tāmaki and SUSO, has excellence attached to them... that opens doors for them.”

- Gene Rivers, Programme Lead



Band Category performers at Stand Up Stand Out Finals 2024

The programme also recognises the risk that many young creatives disengage from their practice after leaving school. As a result, SUSO is intentional about maintaining relationships with alumni well beyond their time in the competition. Alumni shared the significance of being acknowledged and supported as they reached milestones in their careers. By sustaining these connections, SUSO fosters a sense of belonging that ties alumni back into Auckland's creative community, reinforcing the city as a cohesive and supportive place for artists to grow.

"After I had left the competition... I thought that I was long gone. Then I went to Stand Up Stand Out one year and I see this clip of me performing... I'm thankful that Stand Up Stand Out has that... They value the people that come through, they make sure they stay in touch."

- Soakai Malamala, SUSO alumni and secondary school teacher

Contributing to Auckland's creative identity and future

As part of Auckland's designation as a UNESCO City of Music, SUSO reinforces the city's commitment to preserving and investing in its musical and cultural identity. The programme is an example of how investment from local government can nurture local talent and embed music as a valued part of civic life. The calibre and diversity of talent emerging from the competition are widely recognised as reflective of the next generation of artistic leadership.

Cultivating individual talent contributes to broader social cohesion by bringing together rangatahi and audiences across Tāmaki Makaurau, creating shared experiences that cut across school, cultural, and geographic boundaries. The programme fosters pride of place and belonging, particularly for Māori and Pacific young people, while giving wider audiences a chance to celebrate and affirm their creative expression.

As a secondary school initiative, SUSO also highlights the long-term value of early, formative investment in young creatives. By supporting artists at the beginning of their journey, stakeholders believe the programme contributes to a future arts and culture sector that is more vibrant, diverse, and embedded in the identity of the city.

"It starts at the school competitions and Stand Up Stand Out's just a great piece of that puzzle that's building towards a brighter future for Aotearoa and South Auckland."

- Soakai Malamala, SUSO alumni and secondary school teacher



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the sense makers