

International cooperation in discipline-specific quality assurance: NCPA-AEC joint accreditation of Russian higher education programmes

In this paper, a European and subject-specific approach to quality assurance is presented: three higher music education programmes were accredited in February 2012 in the framework of a joint procedure between the National Centre of Public Accreditation (NCPA), a Russian public accreditation agency and the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), a European membership association promoting subject-specific quality assurance in music. The joint accreditation of the study programmes delivered by the Russian Gnesins Academy of Music and the Victor Popov Academy of Choral Art was the first international joint initiative undertaken by NCPA and the first experience of cooperation with a Russian accreditation agency for AEC. Like any “first-born”, this project required considerable effort and attention from its “parents”.

The paper presents both organisations and describes the implementation of their cooperation before addressing the outcomes of the joint accreditation procedure, firstly from an institutional perspective, and secondly from the perspectives of both cooperating organisations.

Parties involved and context

AEC is a European cultural and educational network bringing together 280 higher music education institutions from 55 countries. AEC started to address quality assurance and accreditation in music in 2006 with various projects aiming at the development of a European and music-specific approach to quality assurance and accreditation. In 2010 it produced a comprehensive framework document entitled Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education with characteristics, reference points, criteria, procedures, and established a register of peer-reviewers for external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. In 2008, AEC began offering Quality Enhancement Processes for Higher Music Institutions and Programmes. Since 2010, AEC has developed bilateral collaborations with various national quality assurance and accreditation agencies in Switzerland, Romania, Lithuania and Germany, adding a European-level, subject-specific dimension to national quality assurance and accreditation procedures. A Quality Enhancement Committee, chaired by a member of the AEC’s Governing Body, was established in 2011 to monitor and further develop the use of the AEC Framework Document in quality enhancement procedures.

NCPA is an autonomous non-profit organisation with the mission to establish and promote quality culture in higher education through evaluation and accreditation of study programmes in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG-ENQA). Benefiting from its senior management’s abundant experience in institutional accreditation at the national level, NCPA is engaged in a wide range of activities including programme evaluation and accreditation, information provision on higher education quality issues, training of external reviewers and cooperation with national and international quality assurance bodies. NCPA operates in close interaction with the Russian Guild of Experts in the Sphere of Higher Education. NCPA is a full member of INQAAHE, CEENQA and APQN, and an affiliate of ENQA.

Two major kinds of accreditation in higher education are currently provided in Russia: state accreditation and public accreditation.

State accreditation is conducted by state accreditation authorities in order to determine the extent to which the performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) fulfils the requirements of national education legislation,

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including the state educational standards. When a HEI — either public or private — achieves state accreditation status, it is granted, among other privileges, the right to award certificates of education (diplomas) to its graduates.

At present, public accreditation of study programmes, which can be provided by organisations established by non-governmental or professional associations, is being actively developed in Russia. Public accreditation procedures are voluntary for HEIs and include external reviews by experts representing sectoral employers' associations and the academic and student communities of the relevant study fields. Successful completion of public accreditation procedures is considered evidence that the quality of education in particular specialities and study fields is adequate and deserves recognition by the professional community and by society. Public accreditation does not confer upon HEIs the rights and privileges granted by state accreditation, but it does take into account a higher level of expectations that public organisations and employers have towards study programmes. This contributes to the reputation of accredited programmes and their attractiveness for prospective students, as well as their relevance to employers. There are currently four public accreditation agencies that conduct actual quality assurance activities alongside one state accreditation agency in Russia.

Feasibility and implementation of the joint NCPA-AEC accreditation procedure

In October 2011, the Russian Gnesins Academy of Music and the Victor Popov Academy of Choral Art submitted their applications for the accreditation of some of their programmes to NCPA: Choir Conducting in both academies and Vocal Art in the Popov Academy. The agency carried out an in-depth analysis of the European and global experience in accrediting higher music education programmes and institutions. This led to the conclusion that preparing and implementing these procedures would require a special approach owing to the peculiarities of professional music education, to the specificity of the European approach to quality assessment and to the Russian national context. NCPA felt the need to carry out these procedures in close cooperation with a European-level organisation active in the sphere of higher music education and thus approached the AEC.

AEC accepted NCPA's invitation, which it regarded as a perfect opportunity to gain insight into the Russian accreditation system and to experience cooperation with a Russian accreditation agency. The first contacts between both organisations made it clear that they shared a strong willingness to promote quality enhancement and to assist institutions in their development, as well as a desire to learn from one another and exchange good practice.

Feasibility stage

NCPA thoroughly studied AEC's previous experience of collaborative review processes, as well as AEC's key documentation on internal and external quality assurance procedures (criteria and procedures for external reviews in higher music education; guidelines for review preparation). The collaboration with AEC was also discussed with the Russian Association of Music Education Institutions, which requested that the procedure be as close to that of the AEC as possible. As a result of the comparative analysis of AEC criteria and NCPA standards, NCPA developed an integrated set of standards and criteria to be used for the accreditation of the higher music education programmes subject to evaluation. This document was submitted to AEC and approved.

In AEC's previous experiences of joint procedures, the national agency's standards had been used as the basis of the joint assessment framework. Where these standards were duplicating aspects covered by AEC standards, the wording in the national standards was used. In addition, some AEC criteria, considered as missing in the national standards, were then added. In the present case, the set of merged standards produced by NCPA was fully based on the AEC criteria, which was a first for AEC. As AEC criteria are formulated as questions rather than standards, NCPA's approach created a need to reformulate those criteria into "indicators for the fulfilment of standards" in order to ensure that peer-reviewers would have the necessary tools to assess whether the programmes would comply/substantially comply/not comply with these questions (as requested by NCPA's usual procedure). AEC produced these indicators, which were submitted to NCPA and approved.

Once the document of reference for the accreditation procedure was agreed upon, an exchange of information started on a weekly basis between both organisations through a designated contact person. In order to ensure successful cooperation, both organisations first shared information about their own working methods and procedures; then every single aspect of the joint procedure was discussed — from the number of peer-reviewers to be involved in the Review Panel to the structure of the final reports. When all details were agreed upon in theory, the implementation phase could begin.

Implementation stage

It was jointly decided to appoint four panel members representing European Higher Music Education and two representing the Russian system (including a student). AEC proposed the nomination of an expert in vocal studies from the Royal Flemish Conservatoire, Antwerp, in choral conducting (also representing the profession) from the Royal Conservatoire, The Hague, and in quality assurance, accreditation and Bologna Process implementation in the field of music from the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music, Wrocław. NCPA proposed the nomination of the Review Panel Chair from the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius, a student expert from the Schnittke Moscow State Institute of Music and an expert in choral conducting and composing from the Nizhny Novgorod State Conservatory, Russia.

As far as languages were concerned, the following was agreed: AEC would nominate two Russian-speaking peer-reviewers out of three; all panel members would be able to speak English so that the Panel could communicate easily; the self-evaluation reports (excluding appendices) would be available in English; meetings with the representatives from the institution could take place in Russian according to the institutional participants' ability to speak English and a simultaneous interpreter would be present. Finally, it was agreed that the peer-reviewers' reports would be written in Russian and translated into English.

The site visit schedule was prepared by NCPA and approved by AEC, and the set of documents to be distributed to the experts was jointly prepared. The site visit and the report writing were fully coordinated by NCPA while the follow-up was shared by both organisations.

Outcomes of the joint NCPA-AEC accreditation procedure

The joint procedure made a difference for the institutions

Upon completion of the review processes, the Rectors of the Gnesins Academy of Music and of the Popov Academy of Choral Arts were interviewed and asked to reflect on the benefits and challenges associated with the NCPA-AEC accreditation procedure.

The NCPA-AEC joint procedure was considered by the reviewed academies as beneficial for the following reasons:

- emphasis put on assistance to the institutions and on quality enhancement: the institutions described the SWOT-analysis as an extremely useful instrument for identifying their strengths and weaknesses. The combination of their own perception of the achieved level of implementation of the study programmes under review and the external perspectives of the Review Panel members, especially professional musicians and music educators from European countries, gave a powerful impetus for ongoing enhancement of their musical and educational activities. The Review Panel provided recommendations for further quality enhancement, academic and professional mobility development, improvement of the structure and content of the study programmes and the expansion of students' involvement in educational quality monitoring;
- combination of national and international peer-reviewers: given that graduates of both academies often pursue careers in Europe, the institutions were happy to receive feedback from European experts on ways to adapt their educational process in order to improve the preparation of young musicians for international careers. At the same time, they were reassured by the presence of Russian experts, aware of the national context-specific challenges;

- expertise and attitude of the peer-reviewers: the peer-reviewers were all experts in the field of music with different backgrounds and relevant specialisations, highly qualified and genuinely interested in the programmes under review. They shared their experience, gave helpful recommendations, and were tactful, friendly, and open. The external review was considered by the academies as an opportunity for their teaching staff and students to have an open dialogue with the peer-reviewers;
- areas looked at by the peer-reviewers: the NCPA-AEC peer-reviewers were interested in the educational process and learning outcomes; student involvement in the educational process; the relationship between the students and the institution; students' satisfaction and opportunities to influence the educational process.

The following points were considered challenging by the academies:

- preparation of the self-evaluation report: the institutions found it difficult to carry out a thorough analysis of all aspects of their activities according to the NCPA-AEC standards and criteria. However, despite being challenging, this preparation phase was also found to be highly useful and interesting;
- translation of the material into English: institutions had to translate the self-evaluation documents into English and prepare summaries and annotations to study plans and work programmes. This was an extra workload and created added time pressure;
- quality assurance terminology and jargon: notions such as mission, vision and quality assessment were not commonly used in the institutions and they later expressed some difficulty in understanding precisely what this terminology intended to cover;
- realistic description of the institution: the institutional representatives needed some time to overcome their fear of the external review and realise the necessity and advantages of providing the peer-reviewers with an overview of the institution's situation that was as clear, honest and close to reality as possible.

The joint procedure made a difference for NCPA

NCPA got additional motivation for continuous improvement of its methods and procedures, including revision of the documentation regulating the processes of accreditation and external review. In addition to developing the standards and criteria for the accreditation of programmes of higher music education, NCPA revised a few aspects of its basic accreditation standards. NCPA gained highly relevant practical experience from the active involvement of the Russian academic community in the revision of its regulatory documentation on accreditation, which can be considered as enhancement of the stakeholders' role in the processes of quality assurance of higher education at the national level.

Due to collaboration with AEC, NCPA got a new impetus to increase its flexibility in selecting and training peer-reviewers as well as in the evaluation of peer-reviewers' work. In accordance with the NCPA Regulations on accreditation of higher educational programmes, external reviews are now to include at least one or two foreign peer-reviewers to work alongside Russian peer-reviewers. The international panel members should be nominated by recognised international quality assurance organisations. The aim of such an approach in composing the panel is to ensure the objectivity of the procedures and to introduce a "European dimension".

The NCPA-AEC joint accreditation project contributed to the visibility of the reviewed programmes, both in Russia and Europe, and to the promotion of NCPA as an agency focused on enhancement of the delivery of higher education.

Integration of the "European dimension" of quality assurance into the evaluation procedures and processes carried out by NCPA was another important outcome of the joint initiative. Since Russia is somewhat behind the leading European countries in implementing the Bologna reforms, aspects such as the implementation and use of ECTS, the European Diploma Supplement, learning outcomes, student-centred approaches, internationalisation strategies, academic mobility, etc. were rather challenging, both for HEIs (to demonstrate and document) and for the quality assurance agencies (to assess). In the course of the joint project, the

international peer-reviewers' understanding of the challenges relating to the integration of Russian programmes into the European Higher Education Area was highly appreciated. The Russian agency learned the following from AEC and the peer-reviewers it nominated: a willingness to provide support and to share the experience gained while overcoming obstacles (including mental and psychological barriers), and the predominance of a recommendation-based approach over an instruction-based one.

The joint procedure made a difference for AEC

This first joint procedure with a Russian accreditation agency was considered a success; it enabled AEC to improve its understanding and awareness of the situation in relation to the implementation of the Bologna Declaration principles in Russia, but also provided the association with an opportunity to concretely assist some of its own member institutions.

Language issues were mostly overcome, as most of the Review Panel members could understand and speak Russian. The non-speaking Russian peer-reviewer however, found it difficult to deal with simultaneous interpretation and felt that his understanding of the discussions was in some cases limited.

The cooperation with NCPA has been excellent as contacts were maintained weekly if not daily and both organisations kept each other constantly informed about progress made on each side. Advice from the other organisation was always welcome and a full level of trust was achieved.

In comparison to previous joint procedures undertaken in the past years, AEC could also appreciate NCPA's flexibility, as the agency was willing to adapt its own procedures to AEC's way of working (e.g. appointing a secretary from the agency staff in charge of writing the first draft of the peer-reviewers' report).

As mentioned above, AEC had to reformulate its criteria into "indicators for the fulfilment of standards" in order to facilitate the assessment process for peer-reviewers. As such an assessment (compliance/partial compliance/non-compliance) does not normally take place within *AEC Quality Enhancement Processes* (which, instead, culminate in a report stating the institution's/programme's strong points as well as suggestions for improvement), developing such indicators was new for AEC. As discussions within AEC have begun to turn towards whether the AEC Framework might be used in a formal capacity as part of the compulsory official accreditation procedures that are increasingly faced by higher music institutions in Europe, the need to formulate such indicators for the joint procedure with NCPA also provided the organisation with an opportunity to further develop its system and to test it in a formal context.

Conclusion

This European subject-specific approach to quality assurance has proved successful. The most important factors for a successful cooperation between AEC and NCPA were: shared focus on assistance to institutions and quality enhancement; full trust between both organisations; extensive exchange of good practice; and strong willingness to learn from each other. The key elements which made NCPA-AEC procedure work were: the high level of cooperation of both organisations coordinating the procedure; the competence of the experts in their discipline, in European developments in higher education and higher music education, as well as their positive attitude towards the institutions, reflecting their sole focus on quality enhancement.

Several areas still need further improvement, such as the preparation of the institutions to engage with the joint procedure (in terms of the self-evaluation process, quality assurance terminology, involvement of staff members and students in the process, etc.), the preparation offered to peer-reviewers, the quality of simultaneous interpretation, and follow-up procedures once institutions receive the final report. Even allowing for this scope for further improvement, the authors believe that this model has already achieved a level of success which means it could easily be exported to other countries and to other disciplines.

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