



Trend analysis on quality enhancement  
processes and accreditation procedures in  
the higher music education sector  
2010-2013

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## Introduction

This trend analysis is based on findings from ten review reports on music higher education evaluations from 2010-2013. Four of these (Porto, Singapore, Brisbane, Reykjavik) were institutional reviews conducted according to the AEC Quality Enhancement Process and six (Cluj, Karlsruhe, Vilnius, Moscow, The Hague, Yerevan) were accreditation procedures undertaken jointly by the relevant national agency and the AEC. There were two reports from Vilnius from two study programmes. In these cases the reports follow national structures and the panel members are jointly accepted by all three partners (the national agency, the AEC and the institution).

The relevance of the six latter evaluations can be seen in a double light. If the stress is on national coherence, the criteria have to be abstract enough to cover and measure the activities of all the different disciplines and sectors of higher education organizations. This systemic and functional focus, tried and tested though the process may be, could lead to shallow and irrelevant remarks on substantive issues, hardly helping the institution in ways other than the purely systemic. On the other hand, if the review is based only on internationally acknowledged subject-specific criteria, there is a risk that the nationally oriented compatibility is weak. The advantage for the development of the institution in this case, though, is significantly higher.

The quality enhancement framework created by the higher music education sector covers all essential aspects of accreditation processes and, in addition to this, highlights specific features of higher music education. Generally, all the reports chosen show an optimistic and supportive attitude, including towards those institutions where the internal and external quality assurance work is obviously in the beginning phase. Still, the message is clear: processes have to be put into function. Respect for national, culturally-based characteristics deserves attention and this balance is delicate. Differences in national legislation concerning staff appointment procedures as well as specific labour market features also tend to create confusion. In some countries students are required to stay in the country for a certain period after graduating; in other countries teacher appointments are limited to eight years.

It is obvious that higher education institutions in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet region are struggling with inherited hierarchic and authoritarian attitudes when facing open feed-back-based thinking and stakeholder input. Especially the passive role of the students in decision-making and curriculum design requires attention. Is this to be regarded as a genuine and respectable national feature or is it just a result of an inherited political-social culture? On the other hand, in countries with strong classical music cultures there occur certain reserved and conservative management attitudes in relation to innovative thinking. Sometimes this might even distantly echo the cultural imperialism discourse in the 70s ("our institution actually doesn't need and doesn't support internationalization in the same way as the younger cultures out there do"). Confronting global openness in many institutions can create a certain reserved attitude: how can we accomplish our national duty if our doors are flung wide open? Where is the ideal balance between national and international? And in the non-European cases (Singapore, Brisbane), where internationalization is a main goal, we have to ask: is the European-Western way of thinking about education processes really the only acceptable one? Is there a European-American predominance in quality assurance thinking that doesn't recognize genuine indigenous cultures? What would, for instance, constitute the profile of a specific and genuine Asian non-Western higher music education institution?

The dispositions of the joint reports are structured according to national evaluation regulations, and this sometimes complicates reading and comparison. The fundamental difference between the descriptive part and the decision/recommendation by the panel is not always crystal clear. The linguistic level of the reports is varying and it is hard to eliminate the positive effect a proficient language level has for understanding compared to elementary ones where vague formulations might even obscure the message.

The following text is built on the Criteria for Institutional Review as listed in the document *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education: Characteristics, Criteria and Procedures* (2007).

## 1. Mission and vision

Not very surprisingly, this criterion has called for many comments by the panels. The way a mission is formulated reveals the consciousness of the institution and its task.

Generally the experts are requesting more specific and challenging missions that clarify the identity of the institution and distinguish it from other similar institutions.

Some missions are more descriptive than challenging. Analogically to the combination of national and European evaluation criteria mentioned in the introduction, music higher education units inside universities also have to look for congruity between the university's overall mission and that of the conservatoire. In some cases the mission statements are neither publicly available nor communicated, thus destroying every ambition to a common goal.

In several cases the reports ask for more articulated goals of the educational programmes, with clearer links to the mission of the institution. In cases where institutions are dependent on individual strong personalities, clear descriptions are needed so as not to put at risk the sustainability of the institution. Where innovative thinking is formulated in the mission (for instance changing music professions or new musicianships, new ways of learning or interaction between the arts forms) the institution might use the mission as a recruitment tool, attracting new students and placing the institution in an international context. The compliance with the legislation of the country concerned seems to be self-evident and is stated in all reports.

## 2. Educational processes

In all reports the educational processes are clearly linked to the Bologna Process and the Polifonia Dublin Descriptors<sup>1</sup>.

The comments most commonly found concern strengthening the description of the learning outcomes of separate modules in order to facilitate and secure proper assessment and coherence. This also promotes compatibility on a European level.

In one case national documents for regulating music higher education are completely missing and AEC criteria therefore form a fundamental value in addition to general university study requirements. In Eastern Europe, where quality assurance procedures are slowly emerging, evidence of interrelation and internationalisation is missing and the criteria of the assessment procedures are thus only starting being published.

The progression between the cycles is not always obvious. Research attitudes typically found in the third cycle are sometimes already revealed in the first and second cycles. The teaching forms usually initiate positive comments: there is a broad variety from one-to one situations, group teaching, team teaching, interactive technology and distance learning etc. The possibilities for the students to perform and present their work is generally estimated positively.

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<sup>1</sup> The Polifonia/Dublin Descriptors for 1st, 2nd and 3rd Cycle Awards in Music have been developed by the "Tuning in Music" Working Group (2004-2007) and the "Third Cycle" Working Group (2004-2007) of the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia'. See [http://www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/Polifonia-Dublin%20Descriptors%20150107%20external\(1\).pdf](http://www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/Polifonia-Dublin%20Descriptors%20150107%20external(1).pdf).

In many conservatoires there are career development services enabling students to undertake external performances and, later, bridging the gap between their studies and the profession.

The personal tutoring issue seems to be handled in various ways. In some schools no counselling at all is offered, in others several persons might be involved. Recommendations articulate that informal information doesn't suffice but should be complemented by systematic guidance through tutorial schemes. Tutoring tools are necessarily connected to the information strategy. Today, transparent and easily navigated websites are of great help for students commencing and continuing their studies. Recommendations include the establishment of educational consultants and even advice on how to approach (intimidating) administrative staff where needed!

The role of research is clearly identified as an issue of fundamental importance. Usually, research elements are included only starting from the master level, but there are institutions where research is embedded in all three cycles.

Usually the reports are concerned with too vague formulations on the role of research, and the evaluation team demands clearer definitions, closer dialogue between research and undergraduates as well as mechanisms for feeding research findings back into the teaching.

There are some warning comments where research in conservatoires is being prioritized over teaching and learning. A strange logic appears when students are given signals *not* to develop the research dimension "since students may prefer to study in other institutions where requirements for research work would be less stringent"!

The variety of assessment methods is considerable and the most frequently recurring recommendation is to map assessment methods and marking criteria against learning outcomes.

This, and cross-referencing of competences gained, is seen to be a way to avoid over-assessing and overlapping functions. The issue of internships and of recognition of prior learning seems to need formalization in several places.

### International dimension

There are huge differences between the conservatoires in the way international issues are handled.

Some institutions are actively engaged in developing international strategies, helping to develop the institution towards teacher and students exchange, recruiting new international students, setting targets for internationalisation. Other institutions might even lack international offices and sometimes the role of internationalisation is unclear. In well-functioning systems outgoing students reports from their stay abroad are used to evaluate exchange programmes. In some case it is stated that the international activity of the institution is inconsistent with the expressed ambitions in the mission. Websites may be lacking sections for international students. In traditionally strong cultural nations, the number of incoming international students is high but the number of outgoing students low and therefore needs attention. In more isolated and internationally diffident cultures, exchange of teachers is essential for the vitalization of the school and for developing language skills among students, which in its turn promotes mobility.

In several recommendations, exchange of the teaching staff is encouraged and more active participation in international activities like networks and conferences is recommended. Also, introducing visiting international evaluators is recommended as a means to promote compatibility and the international level of the quality concept.

### 3. Student qualifications

Entrance requirements are generally well conducted with clear criteria formulated. Only in few cases are there recommendations to renew the entrance processes regularly in order to create transparency. In one case, the weight placed upon general education compared to artistic and pedagogical skills in the entrance examination is highlighted as a warning.

Employability is a growing challenge, as the market is rapidly changing.

Many recommendations are given to formalize feedback from the external profession. These include: databases for collecting career data, modules for career management, involving alumni in curriculum development and creating greater openness for social partnerships.

### 4. Teaching staff

Generally the reports show a high degree of commitment from the teaching staff and also a high level of activity as artists or researchers.

Among good practices should be mentioned databases for teachers' reports of their research and development activities. In some schools the teachers are asked to submit proposals for their research projects as a means of supporting scholarly production. In other cases the recommendation is to formalise a programme for such development.

In most schools the number of teachers is adequate to cover the volume of teaching. In some schools teachers have an administrative workload that endangers the concentration on the students' learning.

### 5. Facilities

Comparison between different schools to a great extent shows satisfaction with the premises. Shortage of practice rooms and gathering places for students seem to be a problem, though.

Chapters on instruments and the technological equipment of the schools mainly repeat the same story: students are satisfied, though some complain about piano maintenance. The library services are sometimes outdated, and contemporary material is sometimes missing. In some libraries where public funding has made it impossible to keep up with the changes and new expectations, private initiatives have created significant results.

Whatever their financial resources, many schools fight with declining national funding, and proactive initiatives are needed for survival. Strategic plans for solving long-term funding as well as for fundraising policies are recommended.

The most startling example of national peculiarities tells that the management of one school receives its budget decisions only three months ahead! The number of administrative staff is mainly regarded as adequate, but in several schools the administrative processes need to be monitored and a bigger number of administrative staff employed.

### 6. Quality assurance and curriculum development

The organisational decision-making structure with its responsibilities and reporting mechanisms is not always clear, either as described in organizational figures or for representatives when

interviewed. Channels for internal information are often inefficient.

Handbooks and websites are the most common tools for informing students on decision-making and for creating relations to alumni. In one case, the institution declares that no information need be spread because the school is the only higher music education institution in the country!

One of the big, and even provocative, issues in the evaluative context is the quality assurance system, how the term is being understood and how it is being dealt with. Creating a deeper understanding of a quality assurance system in conservatoires still often meets with considerable problems because the character of the musician's daily rehearsing work obscures the importance of a systematic approach. As most institutions are small, the communication can be handled informally. The rationale for, and consequent building of, robust systems for evaluating and improving, based on a feedback culture, is more successful in bigger institutions, especially if the conservatoire is part of a university with longer traditions of quality work. Integration into the QA system of a university could nevertheless cause problems, as even a well-functioning university QA system may not necessarily meet the special needs of a study programme within the arts.

Prime recommendations to institutions in the early stages of QA are formalizing feedback, creating student bodies and forming stakeholder fora.

A student-centred approach is hard to achieve in cultures built on hierarchical structures and passive, obedient minion attitudes.

In the quality process, curriculum development is the main focus but recommendations are also made about involving wider aspects in the process such as organisation models, facilities and international activity.

## 7. Public interaction

The involvement of most schools in their professional and societal environment is praised in most reports. Conservatoires seem to understand that a proactive attitude towards the professional life is a preparation for the labour market of the students and at the same time a platform for presentation of the study process.

Some conservatoires are recommended to start 'springboard agencies' for facilitating the transfer to the labour market. Schools should also engage in less institutional areas and create free-lance portfolios. Recommendations also concern establishing organizations to monitor data on the employment of alumni.

One surprising statement in the self-evaluation from a conservatoire is that "the involvement of external stakeholders has little influence on study quality". Links with local music schools, regular meetings with the professional community and a strategic and systematic approach are some of the tools for communication with the professional sector. Examples of good practice include the founding of an Industry Advisory Board as well as Memorandum of Understanding in order to formalize relations to the market

## Conclusion

My reading of the reports, together with my personal experiences from evaluation processes with a fusion of national and European standards, has convinced me that the criteria Criteria for Institutional Review in Higher Music Education contain essential characteristics for music education and contribute to the development of institutions in a relevant way. The Criteria are built on profound artistic, educational and organizational experience, whilst still covering all important areas of quality assurance in higher education. Regional and national differences are registered in positive and encouraging ways. Staff development and employability issues aim at positioning the institutions in their social and professional context in a broader way than national criteria tend to do.

Some issues deserve special attention, reflected in the recommendations to the institutions:

- The personal tutoring issue: recommendations articulate that informal information does not suffice but should be complemented by systematic guidance through tutorial schemes.
- Concerning internationalisation, in several recommendations, exchange of the teaching staff and introducing visiting international evaluators is recommended as a means to promote compatibility and secure international level of quality.
- One of the most frequently recurring recommendations is to map assessment methods and marking criteria against learning outcomes. The issue of internships and of recognition of prior learning seems to need formalization in several places.
- Employability is a growing challenge, as the market is rapidly changing. Many recommendations are given to formalize feedback from the external profession.
- In the quality assurance process, curriculum development is still the main focus but recommendations are also made about involving wider aspects in the process such as organisation models, facilities and international activity.