Why respecting diversity and creativity is essential in quality assurance and accreditation processes: Observations and experiences from the field of music

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Setting the stage

The main goal of the European Quality Assurance Forum 2009 (EQAF 2009) has been to address questions on how current internal and external quality assurance approaches take account of institutional diversity and support creativity in higher education. The forum's focus on diversity and creativity was in line with other current initiatives at the European level that also address these issues. For example, the European University Association (EUA) project 'Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda (QAHECA)'[3] has made several important recommendations in this respect, while the 'U-Map' project[4] has shown the vast diversity in European higher education through its efforts to create a classification of higher education institutions in Europe.

Music is one of those academic disciplines that exemplify the diversity of the European higher education landscape: most Conservatoires, Musikhochschulen, Music Universities and Music Academies are independent institutions, which, although being firmly embedded in the higher education systems, are set up differently to other higher education institutions. The features that distinguish music from other academic and indeed artistic disciplines are clearly described in the document *Higher Music Education – Summary of Tuning Findings* (Messas and Prchal, 2009), which has recently been published by the 'Tuning' Project. As can be seen below, music is also a discipline that has taken a pro-active approach towards quality assurance and accreditation through its *Institutional and Programme Review Scheme*[5] and its close collaboration with various national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, the leading European organisation representative of the sector, the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC)[6], has developed substantial expertise in the field.

This paper will take this process a step further by sharing observations based on the experiences gained in the field of music over the past few years. These observations will clearly underline the need for quality assurance and accreditation procedures to be sensitive to diversity and creativity in higher education, and can undoubtedly be extended to other academic disciplines.

Quality assurance and accreditation in the field of music

The AEC started to address quality assurance and accreditation in music in 2002 within the framework of the project 'Music Study, Mobility and Accountability'[7] undertaken in co-operation with the National Association of Schools of Music (a formal accrediting body in higher music education in the US)[8] with support of the EU/USA programme. This project gave the Association the unique possibility to gain insight into issues of specialised accreditation in music. This was followed by the project 'Accreditation in European Professional Music Training'[9] initiated in 2006 with support from the European Commission, which aimed at the development of a European and music-specific approach to quality assurance and accreditation. The project produced a comprehensive framework document entitled *Quality Assurance and Accreditation*

in Higher Music Education: Characteristics, Criteria and Procedures[10] with characteristics, reference points, criteria[11], procedures, and a register of experts for external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. Since 2007, the Accreditation Working Group, created within the Erasmus Network for Music 'Polifonia'[12] is in charge of monitoring and further developing the use of the AEC Framework Document in the newly established *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme.*

The *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* is designed as a European subject-specific peer review system in the field of music and consists of review visits performed by panels of experts with the aim of providing assistance to higher music education institutions in their quality enhancement activities. The scheme was tested through test review visits in institutions in Weimar, Oslo, Prague and Trieste during the spring of 2007. During the autumn of 2007, the AEC reviewed five music academies in Bosnia-and-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia in the framework of a project financed by the Swedish international development cooperation agency Sida[13]. This was followed by two review visits in the Netherlands and Spain during the spring of 2008 in the framework of the 'Polifonia' Network. The institutions visited provided positive feedback about the reviews and in particular regarding the competence of the experts in the fields of music, the relevance of the AEC criteria, the experts' questions, remarks and suggestions to the institution, as well as the supportive atmosphere created by the critical but friendly panels. Reviews of one institution in the United Kingdom, four in Poland, one in Portugal, one in Singapore and one in Cyprus are scheduled for 2010.

In addition to the informal procedures of this scheme, the AEC framework is increasingly being used by national quality assurance or accreditation authorities in the execution of formal quality assurance or accreditation procedures in higher music education at the national level. The AEC has established several types of bilateral cooperation with national quality assurance and accreditation agencies in Europe:

- For certain procedures, the criteria of both the AEC and the national agency are compared and merged, and the AEC advises on international experts. The agency then uses these criteria and experts in its procedures. Such cooperation is currently in place with the Swiss Accreditation Agency OAQ, the Romanian Accreditation Agency ARACIS and the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education in Lithuania for formal accreditation procedures in 2009 and 2010.

- In other procedures, the criteria are firstly merged, after which the AEC assembles a committee of international experts, undertakes the review visit and produces the final report of the visit to be submitted to the national agency for the accreditation decision. Such cooperation is in place with the German accreditation agencies ACQUIN and ZEVA, and was implemented for the first time for a review of a joint European programme in Germany in April 2009.

Apart from these activities initiated and implemented by the AEC, various members of the AEC community are being involved as peer experts in national quality assurance procedures in higher music education in various European countries. The experiences gained in these procedures are reported back to the Accreditation Working Group[14], which has the task to monitor quality assurance or accreditation procedures both within and outside the AEC. Thus, a wealth of information on national developments is collected, compared and analysed, helping the AEC to oversee the European quality assurance or accreditation landscape.

What have we learned and how can other fields learn from our experiences?

Based on these activities and experiences, a set of observations can be formulated that clearly indicate the existence of a high level of diversity in higher education and underline the need to take this diversity into consideration in quality assurance processes.

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[10] This document can be found at www.bologna-and-music.org/reviewscheme
[11] Please note that criteria for both institutional and programme reviews have been developed and included in the AEC Framework
Document.
[12] See for more information about the 'Polifonia' project http://www.polifonia-tn.org
[13] See for more information about this project www.aecinfo.org/sida
[14] See for more information about the 'Polifonia' Accreditation Working Group: http://www.polifonia-tn.org/accreditation

Defining the term ´quality´

A certain distinction of the various types of and approaches to quality in higher education can be identified under the term "quality":

1. The quality of *products*, in which the main focus seems to be on the quality of the academic and artistic achievements of students and teachers

2. The quality of *processes*, e.g. the educational processes that are aimed at producing high quality products as mentioned in the previous point

3. The quality of *structures*, e.g. the organisational structures and resources that are meant to support the educational processes.

In music, the main focus has traditionally been on the first type of quality, which is the type visible to music professionals both inside and outside the institution, and to the public as well. For this purpose, music has developed a unique expertise for talking about and judging the quality of musical achievements through years of experience in audition panels, competitions committees and selection procedures. In order to achieve this first type of quality, institutions must also be effective in addressing the second and third types and, although this has been done successfully in institutions in different ways over the years, less time and attention has been given to preparing written formulations regarding the second and third types, especially those that justify institutional systems against an externally derived set of organisational and reporting expectations. Institutional time has been mainly focused on having procedural and structural systems serve students and field, rather than students and field being the instruments for validating procedural and structural systems. As some quality assurance systems (especially those operating at the institutional level) mainly seem to focus on the second and third types of quality, a danger of a misunderstanding between existing traditions and cultures on the one hand, and new approaches and systems on the other can emerge.

Being sensitive to disciplinary, cultural and contextual diversity

Various initiatives have made reference to the need for taking disciplinary, cultural and contextual diversity into account in quality assurance and accreditation processes. Already in 2005, an *AEC-NASM statement on the characteristics of an effective evaluation system for music schools and conservatoires* was produced as one of the outcomes of the 'Music Study, Mobility and Accountability' project. This statement mentioned that, in order to be effective in reviewing conservatoires with respect to music content and institutional mission, a review entity must "respect the natures, achievements, aspirations, and structures of individual institutions" (European Association of Conservatoires and National Association of Schools of Music, 2004).

More recently, EUA's QAHECA project formulated the following statement as its first recommendation based on the findings of the project:

First and foremost, quality assurance must always be context sensitive and thus individualised. When developing quality assurance processes HEIs and QA agencies need to take into account disciplinary characteristics, various organisational cultures, the historical position of the institution as well as the national context (EUA, 2009, p. 7).

Taking a view from a disciplinary perspective and based on the reality that there are still many hundreds if not thousands of specialist higher education institutions in Europe that focus on one or only a few disciplines, it is clear that an understanding of diversity in relation to discipline, culture and context is essential in quality assurance processes. Systems that are generic and use the same procedure for small specialised institutions as for large multidisciplinary higher education institutions with non-specialist experts (as recently observed in an institutional review in the UK), should therefore not be seen as examples of good practice. Such an approach forces small specialised institutions to invest a disproportionate part of their budget to set up a form of 'total quality management' with heavy quality control structures that will only slow down institutional development and be alien to their highly specific internal quality culture.

A good example of how misunderstandings can occur when generic non-specialist procedures review music institutions revolves around the issue of student involvement and feedback. The individual approach of the training used in music institutions is intense and essential, with one-to-one teaching still one of the most effective methods of teaching in higher music education. When asked about their learning experience, music students are usually very positive because of this highly individual approach. Typically, they also express their satisfaction of having sufficient ways to provide feedback on their learning experience, which usually is given to teachers and programme leaders in an informal way. At the same time, because of the highly individual focus of their studies, music students are rarely interested in becoming involved in formal internal management and quality structures. In generic review procedures with non-specialist experts that are insensitive to this reality, the institution may be criticised for not having much student involvement in the formal internal structures. The institution may then be advised to implement robust formal structures that are alien to the informal institutional culture and may have a negative impact on the existing creative atmosphere. This does not mean that formal procedures are not important, but the role of informal feedback mechanisms, which in small institutions can sometimes be very effective, should be taken into account.

Endangering institutional creativity

In this context, it is also interesting to point out that the QAHECA project of EUA raised the question of how to avoid quality assurance and accreditation procedures endangering creative processes in institutions. One may dismiss this issue as being too abstract, but it was observed during the abovementioned institutional review procedure in the UK, in which the institution was going through a very exciting and creative process of reflection and change, putting its otherwise well structured internal review procedures temporarily on hold. This was severely questioned by the review panel and by doing so the review actually damaged the institution in its development. In the QAHECA project final report, it is rightly remarked that "The danger of trying to appease the agencies at the expense of institutional-based creativity does exist and HEIs and QA agencies should work together to diminish its likelihood" (EUA, 2009).

Separating content and process

Some quality assurance systems (especially those operating at the institutional level) claim they are only concerned with quality processes and not with the quality of the content. This leads to a superficial separation of process and content, which for subject-specific institutions is unhelpful, in their context the content defines the process. Therefore, the presence of subject-specific expertise on the review panel is essential in any procedure in such schools. In addition, even institutional reviews that claim to check process only will need to address content issues that are developed by the institution as a whole. Examples of such issues are the place of research in all cycles, or the coherence of the educational content between cycles. Again, these are issues that should be judged by subject-specialists.

The separation of content and process can also have negative effects on the involvement of students and teaching staff. It is evident that the expertise in quality assurance is constantly developing further: more and more quality assurance experts emerge, panel and student experts are being trained, and interviewees are being prepared, briefed and debriefed. As a consequence, a specialised jargon is developing that is increasingly not understood by 'ordinary' staff or students. Ideally, a good internal quality assurance system works well when questions can be asked of random individuals in the institution. If this is not the case and information is only gathered from documents and individuals that are prepared, trained and briefed, there is a danger of the quality process separating itself from everyday reality and becoming an abstract superficial circus with a goal unto itself. Quality assurance agencies should make an effort to understand 'the language' of the institution being reviewed, instead of students and staff in institutions having to adapt to the highly specialised language developed and used by quality assurance experts.

Balance between assurance and enhancement

Another important issue is the balance between assurance and enhancement. Experiences with the Dutch accreditation system at the programme level show how quality assurance agencies are often

mainly focused on the compliance with existing criteria, a kind of 'ticking boxes' approach, without giving much attention to recommendations on how issues could be improved. Of course institutions have to be accountable, but they should also be encouraged to improve themselves according to what the expert panel has found. Otherwise institutions may be happy to pass the quality assurance and accreditation processes at a 'minimum level' and then carry on as before. We believe this is an opportunity missed and therefore always formulate a substantial set of recommendations for improvement.

Understanding the need for a stronger European dimension

Much has been said about the need for strict objectivity in any quality assurance or accreditation procedure. Not only in small countries, but also in small disciplines it can sometimes be a challenge to find truly objective peers without preset opinions. Seen from the perspective of a European organisation, this issue can easily be resolved by involving peers from abroad. Apart from heightened objectivity, involving foreign peers can bring fresh and new insights based on different perspectives, which can assist institutions in their further development. However, as has been noticed in the *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* that mainly uses international experts, some information about the national higher education system needs to be provided. Nevertheless, it is a strange paradox that while higher education institutions are being asked within the framework of the Bologna Process to increase their European dimension and students and staff are encouraged to do European exchanges and mobility, the quality assurance or accreditation procedures are still mainly nationally based. Should there not be much more interaction between the agencies, e.g. on criteria or suggestions on peer experts? Or how about a European exchange programme for quality assurance officials?