



Trend analysis on quality enhancement
processes and accreditation procedures
in the higher music education sector
2014-2016

By Christopher Caine, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London, UK

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Introduction

This trend analysis compares the findings of eight MusiQuE reviews reports. It identifies specific features of good practice and it highlights common areas for development which will be of relevance to a broad spectrum of the European higher music education sector. This report does not make specific recommendations. It aims instead to provide MusiQuE with information that will enable it to plan its future priorities as a quality assurance agency and to inform the European higher music education sector. Reports considered within the analysis include:

- Four reports of joint Institutional Quality Enhancement Reviews carried out by MusiQuE and the Belgian agency AEQES. Reviews were conducted at the Conservatoire Royal de Bruxelles (CrB), the Institut de Musique et de Pédagogie (IMEP), the Conservatoire Royal de Liège (Liège), and the Ecole supérieure des Arts (ARTS) in 2014-2015.
- One report of an Institutional Review of the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (HAMU) conducted in 2014.
- One report of an accreditation of programmes delivered by the Kazakh National Conservatory (KNC) conducted in 2016.
- One report of a joint accreditation by MusiQuE and the German accreditation Agency (ZEvA) of programmes delivered by the Hochschule für Musik Karlsruhe (HMK) conducted in 2016.
- One report of a peer-review of the research activities of the Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag (KCDH) under the Branch Protocol Quality Assurance Research procedure conducted in 2017.

It should be noted that the content and format of the above MusiQuE reports varied according to the purpose of the review (collaborative with a national agency with merged criteria, accreditation, peer review, Institutional Quality Enhancement etc.). The following trend analysis is therefore an extrapolation, synthesis and drawing together of common issues, using reports of varying formats with similar, but not identical purposes.

1. Mission/Vision, Management, Quality Assurance (QA) and Communications

Institutional Mission/Vision

1.1 A number of institutions were commended for the strength of mission and vision and for the quality of institutional reflection. This appears to be most effective when the aims of the institution are distinct, promulgated and shared throughout all levels of the institution. The strong correlation between the mission and the institution's programmes was commended in some reports. Reports highlighted specific institutional unique selling points and specialisms such as improvisation, contemporary music, innovative programmes including joint programmes and research.

Management

1.2 **A comparison of the reports demonstrates the importance of strong and systematic leadership as a means of progressing institutional mission and vision.** One institution for example was specifically commended for proactive management and another for its structured development including organisational change. However, it is clear that for a number of reasons, some institutions struggle with aspects of delivering institutional vision/mission. Whilst some institutions were commended for strong aspirations and good long-term planning, development was sometimes thwarted by poor management structures, a lack of delegation, and insufficient buy-in at all institutional levels.

1.3 Whilst some institutions were commended for the clarity of their management structures, several review teams suggested that leadership would be strengthened by the formulation of management organograms which outline structures and responsibilities clearly. In some cases, reports recommended better use of action plans with timelines, designated lines of responsibility and supported by reliable management information (statistics, financial etc.).

Quality Assurance (QA)

1.4 A strong ethos of quality assurance was noted in several of the reports. Evidence within reports suggested that QA is at its strongest when its procedures involve a wide-range of internal stakeholders coupled with formal and systematic procedures. Some institutions have well-established mechanisms for involving students and/or external stakeholders. However it is clear that some institutions need to develop formal QA mechanisms that optimise internal engagement, including student evaluation of teachers and to ensure that information is used systematically to assure, improve and enhance provision. There are several instances where students are not sufficiently involved in the QA process or where QA feedback relies too much on informal, undocumented communication. **Overall, reports indicate considerable variation in the effectiveness of QA and other recommendations include sharing of good practice across institutions, the involvement of external experts and ensuring that a wide range of institutional activity is subject to QA including administration and personnel.**

Communications (including web-based)

1.5 A range of communication tools was evident within the reports. At best, communications were highly organised with effective use of the internet/intranet including publishing programme materials such as the specification of programmes. One institution was commended for an open and informal style of communication and decision making. **However, it is evident that there is scope for more consistency across the sector with several of the reports recommending more systematic collation and publishing of programme materials and better control and regular review of content.** One report suggested that the formulation of an institutional content management policy would be an effective tool to achieve such aims. Review teams recommended more consistent use of web-based tools in respect of the publishing of programme-related materials (programme specifications, admissions requirements etc.).

2. Programme relevance, employability and externality

Employability

2.1 The inclusion of employability as an important driver for programme curriculum was noted in several of the reports. Placement opportunities – for instance within an orchestra - and curricular options/projects within programmes were commended as a means of enhancing curriculum relevance and employability. Some institutions were commended for running programmes with particular vocational specialisms.

2.2 However, there was a call in several of the reports for improved student access to placements, perhaps through more effective structures within the curriculum (structured placement/projects, improved timetable, well-paced workload etc.) or through better liaison with external parties. Similarly, some reports suggested that the scope of options and projects could be improved so as to encourage more breadth, inter-disciplinary activity and employability. Overall, reports seemed to comment favourably where interdisciplinary and breadth were evident in the curriculum.

2.3 A small number of institutions were encouraged to reconsider and adapt their curriculum in the light of their mission, and/or current and future professional trends of employment.

Structures

2.4 One review team noted that modular structures can be effective in providing students with choice and flexibility in their studies. So as to achieve economies of scale and structural flexibility, a number of institutions were recommended to review the number and structure of their programmes, for example through moving to a pathway structure within one bigger 2nd cycle programme rather than smaller discrete 1st or 2nd cycle programme.

Programmes and externality

2.5 Strong relationships between programmes and the local/regional cultural environment was a significant theme emanating from the reports. Reports suggest that effective relationships between the institution and the local external environment can produce a number of benefits including: fruitful professional placement opportunities for students; a curriculum that encourages employability; enhanced programme development; student commitment to social engagement and citizenship; and enhanced opportunities for students to present their work in external community settings. Other potential positive spin-offs noted in reports included enhanced potential for student recruitment.

2.6 Whilst most institutions expressed enthusiasm for external partnerships, some reports indicated that more concerted work needs to be carried out in order for this to be fully achieved. In some cases, reports indicated that external partnerships, placements and student engagement in the community relied too much on individual members of the teaching staff and that a more systematic approach within the institution was needed. Other methods put forward to improve approaches to external partnerships included tracking of student and alumni professional engagement and bringing together external partners in a systematic and regular manner so as to generate collaboration and dialogue. In a small number of cases, the curriculum itself was identified as being obstructive to greater exploitation of external opportunities, either through curricular over-load, or a lack of openness to what the external world can bring to the curriculum.

International dimensions

2.7 Some institutions were commended for strong educational and professional international networks. Such international networks encourage potential benefits on both the curriculum and the visibility of the institution

within the sector. One institution was reported as running a joint programme with institutions from two other countries.

All institutions had expressed enthusiasm for international dimensions within their programmes and the ERASMUS and ERASMUS+ programme figured in many of the reports. Several reports noted that ERASMUS activity needed to be further promoted and systematically utilised so as to gain more benefit. Another institution was noted as being positively disposed to international activity but in reality, reticent and cautious, largely through concerns about maintaining standards. In this case, the report recommended consideration of a teaching in English policy, investment in structured partnerships with suitable international institutions and exploration of the desirability of running a joint programme(s). Not specific to ERASMUS, another institution was given similar advice in the context of the broader aim of extending international links.

2.8 Despite having some well-developed international and ERASMUS activity in the form of a joint programme, one institution was advised to consider forming an International Strategy so as to formalise and codify existing good practice. It was also encouraged to extend its joint programme offer.

2.9 More broadly, institutional adoption of an Internationalisation Strategy would potentially offer institutions a systematic method of reflecting on its aims and systems for international activity.

3. Coherence of programmes – correspondence to Bologna principles (learning outcomes, module/course descriptions, assessment/evaluation of student work).

Learning outcomes

3.1 Review teams looked at how programmes are defined in terms of aims, objectives and outcomes and how they correspond to the three levels of higher education music study (1st, 2nd and 3rd cycles). The principles are set out in the Bologna agreement and the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) has been active in enshrining the principles for higher music education as described in the AEC Learning Outcomes and Polifonia Dublin Descriptors.

3.2 Review teams reported considerable variation in the description of skills/competencies and knowledge and their application across the three levels of study. One institution was commended for setting new objectives of learning which were supported by good structures and organisation thus facilitating the student learning journey. Another was commended for its learner outcomes at Bachelors level. Skills, competencies and aims were described well with objectives of the study programme cited as exemplary at 1st cycle level.

3.3 However, reports urged most institutions to carry out more work in this area. Some institutions had formulated learner outcomes for a particular programme or level of study but they either needed improvement or else to be applied/extended consistently to all programmes. Differentiation between outcomes for 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle provision was sometimes problematic and in need of more rigour. Module descriptions (course documents) could also be variable in terms of detail and consistency.

Assessment

3.4 One institution was commended for its work in the area of assessment procedure, written feedback and the opportunity of a student defence as part of the process. **Reports identified assessment as a substantial area for development**, notably, mapping aims/objectives and outcomes on to assessment along with the formulation of assessment/marking criteria. One review team recommended that the formulation of an assessment policy would go some way to addressing shortcomings. Codification in the form of an assessment policy has the potential to be used to develop staff in terms of written feedback, assessment methods and the sharing of good practice. One institution was advised to seek good practice within the sector, perhaps using some of the work that the AEC has carried out in this area.

3.5 Overall, the area of assessment (links between learner outcomes and assessment, assessment criteria, assessment methods and feedback) seems to be a critical area and one that would benefit from an appropriate level of focus and scrutiny across the sector.

3.6 Some institutions were recommended to address variability in the application of credit points and to align this more closely with the ECTS User Guide. In one institution the practice was for ECTS to be allocated by administrators and the review report concluded that this practice should be reviewed.

3.7 Several review teams discussed the role of students in assessment. Student self-assessment and reflection was recommended as a useful strategy for some institutions. Similarly, review teams suggested that a number of institutions build in student autonomy and proactivity into the learner outcomes of programmes.

3.8 Overall, review reports point out the positive effects that student self-assessment, peer-assessment and reflection can produce on the learning experience and this would seem to be an area that could be explored more widely in the European music higher education community.

4. Student Support and Student admissions to programmes

Admissions –entry requirements

4.1 Review teams identified several areas where admissions procedures could be improved. For instance, some institutions were recommended to provide better support and monitoring for students who had been admitted on potential rather than demonstrating the normal level of accomplishment required for entrants. In some cases, recommendations were made for a reconsideration of the requirements and criteria for entrance, including the recognition of prior learning in the admissions procedures. Monitoring of student progression and achievement was specifically commended in two institutions. One report called for better collation and use of management information in relation to student admissions.

Welfare and careers

4.2 Commendations were made in two cases for welfare and careers support and one institution was noted as giving very good support in relation to deferral of examinations in cases of hardship and/or welfare issues. Conversely, two reports highlighted the need for improvement in this area.

4.3 As stated elsewhere in this report, review teams were unanimous in their commendation of the teaching staffs and their contribution to student support which in some cases, extended to helping with professional integration (insertion) into professional activities.

4.4 **There is perhaps potential for further focus on student support (welfare, careers etc.) within the review procedure.**

5. Resources: human (HR), material, facilities

Human

5.1 A striking uniform endorsement of the engagement, commitment and quality of teaching staff was expressed in all the reports. **The impression given is one of a dynamic sector teaching force characterised by individual endeavour and initiative.** Some institutions were commended for the esprit du corps of the teaching body. As noted in 1.2 above, it is important that leaders establish an inclusive ethos which brings in the teaching force and supports the overall mission/vision and aims of the institutions in order to maximise the institutional effectiveness.

5.2 One institution was noted as emanating a pervading climate of continuing professional development exemplified by investment in staff and consistent support for teacher research activities. In this instance, a number of enhancement measures were suggested such as the formation of research clusters, undertaking a review of the research catalogue, clarifying the criteria for in-house research funding and instilling further an attitude of life-long-learning to CDP.

5.3 However, a common theme in reports was the need for a more organised and consistent support system for CDP along with a formalised system of staff appraisal. It should be noted that resourcing of CDP - which is sometimes not within the complete control of the institution - was sometimes a barrier. In one case, a recommendation was made that CDP be prioritised for 2nd and 3rd cycle programmes so as to improve the quality of teaching at higher levels. Staff progression and opportunities for promotion was highlighted as an issue in one report.

5.4 A number of institutions were recommended to review the level of staffing to various programmes.

5.5 One institution was commended for its HR actions and management policies describing them as forward thinking and reflective. Another report commented on good policies relating to gender, justice, equal opportunities. However one institution was identified as being in need of development in these areas and two institutions were advised to look for good sector practice in relation to equal opportunities.

5.6 One institution was commended for the positive engagement of its administrative staff. Another was recommended to set up a more formal policy of CDP for its administrative staff.

5.7 Reviews could potentially be enhanced by giving greater consideration to the roles and effectiveness of administrative staff given the important role that they have in the smooth running of an institution and the support that they are often required to give to students.

Material and facilities

5.8 All review teams investigated the fitness for purpose of the material resources and facilities. As to be expected, there was considerable variation in standards. One institution was noted as having very good all-round facilities. Two institutions were commended for their library facilities.

Projects to improve facilities were commended in several reports. Review teams made specific recommendations about which areas these improvement projects could address (practice facilities, room bookings, library, acoustics etc.). However, better and more systematic financial planning was recommended for facilities improvement in some institutions.

5.9 Review teams made several comments on information technology. Efficient use of IT in relation to student progression and achievement was noted in one institution although it was by no means universally the case. Several reports highlighted the need for better use of IT for student record keeping, financial planning and communications (website, intranet, virtual learning environment).

5.10 It was clear that, overall, reports had given these areas detailed consideration and that recommendations were appropriately robust and frank.

6. Research

6.1 Reviews reflected the increasing importance of research within the conservatoire sector highlighting several areas of good practice. Examples included impressive integration of research into programmes.

6.2 The Research Unit at KCDH as a specialist entity was commended in this area for strong ambitions and investment particularly at Masters Level. Research outputs in some areas were commended as leading and of international standing supported by strong international networks, partnerships and connections. Indeed, the report noted how research was becoming part of the DNA at both first and second cycles, such that it had an impact on professional practice and knowledge. Additionally, there were signs that this was having positive effect on student recruitment.

6.3 Reports demonstrate that there is considerable sector variability in the extent to which students engage with research. Further efforts are needed in some institutions to give greater emphasis to, and embed research into, the fabric of programmes. One suggested method of achieving these goals was to extend the range of networking and research contacts (national and international) and identifying good practice within the sector.

6.4 Priority and resource allocation for research (human and financial) were deemed insufficient in some institutions and recommendations were made for more incentives to encourage a more research-orientated environment.

6.5 The definition of practice-based research is perhaps more opaque in a conservatoire setting than that of traditional “academic research”. Even where research was very well established, some reports called for a clearer definition and a further widening of the scope of such research. Review teams suggested that a formal policy document (Research Policy) might help achieve this and at the same time, assist in differentiation between research expectations for the three cycles of study.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the variety of reports considered in this trend analysis, there was clearly perceptible commonness of purpose which enabled a thorough and useful consideration of examples of good practice and areas for development.

Quality assurance is sometimes tainted by apprehensions about regimentation, uniformity and unnecessary bureaucracy. **The eight reports considered within this analysis demonstrate examples within a dynamic European higher music education sector which is committed to achieving the highest possible standards. Review reports reveal a quest for improvement that has the potential to produce significant positive effects on educational outputs and the student experience.** Additionally, quality assurance enhances mutual international understanding of curriculum, procedures and standards whilst respecting and applauding diversity. These values most certainly emanate from the review reports which, along with this trend analysis, will provide useful information as MusiQuE reflects on its future development and priorities.