

## **Quality assurance and accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Music as a case study**

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### ***Quality assurance and higher music education***

Few subject areas have such an intrinsic obsession with demonstrating quality as does music: students are constantly asked to perform for committees, auditions, competitions and (the ultimate test of all) the concert-going public. At the same time, a limited experience exists with external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in music. Indeed, external review processes are still often approached with some suspicion, especially when done by non-specialist organisations and experts.

### ***AEC action in this area***

To address this issue, a SOCRATES project entitled 'Accreditation in European Professional Music Training' was undertaken by the European Association of Conservatories (AEC) with quality assurance and accreditation as its main theme. The project built upon the successful results of the EU/USA project entitled 'Music Study, Mobility and Accountability', which ran from 2002 to 2004 in partnership with the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) in the United States, a specialist accrediting organisation for professional music institutions<sup>2</sup>.

### ***What do we mean by 'quality'?***

In this AEC project, a profound discussion emerged regarding the use of the term 'quality'. When applying the Bologna principles on quality assurance to higher music education, what kind of quality should be addressed: should we discuss musical, educational or managerial quality, or maybe a combination of these?

In order to be able to address issues on quality assurance in a more general sense, the working group had to start with making some statements on musical quality and its relation to the general quality assurance issues. The group felt the need to stress that the esthetical value of a piece of art is inherent in the art-work itself, hence no general norms can be defined for musical quality. A piece of music may well have qualities related to use and function. Such qualities are important and should not be underestimated, but they can never replace the intrinsic artistic quality.

Moreover, qualitative standards in music are developed in musical traditions. The artistic experience and expectations embedded in a musical tradition form the backdrop against which musical quality can be assessed. In other words, music creates qualitative standards for music, all within cultural contexts and traditions. This is eloquently described in the document "Quality, Assurance, Accountability: A Briefing Paper":

"Music study is permeated with accountability. Music requires a special relationship between accuracy and freedom. In practice sessions, rehearsal, and even in performance, constant evaluation and adjustment are the norm. The success of professional music study is evaluated in light of the high standards and high expectations of the larger musical world. Tours, recordings, and international competition continue to define professional expectations by exchange of work at the highest levels. In music, we have standards because we have art, not art because we have standards."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The outcomes of the project, nominated by the European Commission as the first (and so far only) 'Best Practice Project' in the EU/USA programme, can be found on the project website <http://msma.arts-accredit.org>.

<sup>3</sup> For a full version of this document, see [www.bologna-and-music.org/externalqa](http://www.bologna-and-music.org/externalqa)

Therefore, because of these assumptions, it was seen as essential that whenever higher music education institutions were faced with quality assurance or accreditation procedures set up for higher education in general, these would have to use criteria and procedures that would address the artistic function of the institutions in addition to other more general issues.

### ***Higher music education***

Before providing more information on the work on quality assurance and accreditation in higher music education done by the project, the term higher music education requires explanation and definition. The 'Tuning' Group for the subject area, working in the framework of the ERASMUS Thematic Network for Music 'Polifonia'<sup>4</sup>, characterises higher music education as musical study undertaken in the context of higher education that has a primary focus upon students' practical and creative development. These kinds of music study are mainly offered by specialist institutions of the kind referred to as conservatoires, musikhochschulen, music academies and music universities, which may be stand-alone institutions or departments within larger multidisciplinary institutions.

Higher music education places a professionally oriented principal study area at the core of the student's learning. For most students the principal study is of a practical nature. Study elements of academic, theoretical and practical nature are arranged around each principal study area to support it.

There are several aspects important to higher music education that need to be recognised and preserved in any attempt to harmonise this training with the requirements of the Bologna Declaration. Some of the assumptions embedded in the Declaration need special qualification when applied to higher music education:

- The concept of employability, to which the Bologna Declaration refers, is problematic when applied to higher music education. Even if there are a number of organised professions for musicians many conservatory graduates become freelance artists
- Training in higher music education depends fundamentally upon students having obtained a significant level of musical skills prior to entry. Primary and secondary schools do not always offer opportunities for obtaining such skills. Consequently, conservatoires need to assess their applicants through specially designed entrance examinations, which may consist of live auditions with juries of teachers.
- The objective of removing barriers to mobility needs to be seen in the context of a long tradition within higher music education of students moving from one institution – and country – to another as they pursue their personal growth as musicians. Again, though, even with readable and increasingly compatible qualifications, the principle of verifying a student's capabilities through entrance examinations remains an important cornerstone to any of the three cycles of higher education in a conservatoire.
- The learning process in higher music education centres on the personal and artistic development of the individual student. For most conservatoire students, one-to-one tuition is of paramount importance for this development.
- At the same time, when taken as a whole, the field of music involves many other learning and teaching approaches, some of which reflect the interdisciplinary character of the subject. A student's higher music education often combines formal, non-formal and informal elements and regularly includes experiences that take place within the professional environment.

<sup>4</sup> Visit for more information about 'Polifonia' the extensive website at [www.polifonia-tn.org](http://www.polifonia-tn.org)

- Since obtaining a high artistic level is not only a matter of mastering technical and intellectual challenges but is also dependent upon acquiring inner maturity as a musician, the duration of music study is likely to be longer than for most other disciplines and, specifically, longer for the first cycle than the three-year minimum indicated in the Bologna Declaration.
- Institutions specialising in higher music education support a wide range of original and innovative work across the performing, creative, and academic fields. They welcome the broad definition of research employed in, for example, the shared Dublin Descriptors of the Joint Quality Initiative, and they recognise a special responsibility to develop research in and through practice in the performing and creative arts.

As a consequence, in addition to the comments made on musical quality above, these characteristics would also have to be taken into account in quality assurance and accreditation procedures for higher music education.

#### ***The AEC framework document on quality assurance and accreditation***

It was with these facts in mind that a framework document was developed by a Europe-wide working group, which contains suggestions and guidelines to support quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. This document, entitled 'Quality assurance and accreditation in higher music education: characteristics, criteria and procedures', includes the following chapters:

- Characteristics of higher music studies, highlighting the special features of higher music education as an introduction
- Characteristics of an effective evaluation system for the professional music training sector
- Programme outcomes to be used as reference points: the 'Polifonia/Dublin Descriptors', illustrating the typical profiles of the three study cycles in higher music education, and the 'Descriptions of learning outcomes for the first, second and third cycles in music study', as developed in the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia'.
- Criteria for programme and institutional review in music, which have been formulated in a list with specific sections (mission and vision; educational processes; student qualifications; teaching staff; facilities, resources and support; public interaction).
- Procedures for programme and institutional review in music, which have been developed taking into account the 'European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' (ENQA 2005) and the ECA Principles for the Selection of Experts. These procedures include several stages (self-study; peer review visit; a report with findings and recommendations; follow-up procedures).

The developed standards and procedures are applicable to institutional accreditation procedures, as well as to programme accreditation procedures. They can be used for reviews of independent higher music education institutions and music faculties, schools or departments in larger educational institutions. The suggested criteria and guidelines were thoroughly tested during pilot review visits in institutions in Weimar, Prague, Oslo and Trieste during the spring of 2007.

The document takes into account that quality assurance and accreditation can involve many different stakeholders and take place in national and European contexts. In most countries, educational authorities conduct quality assurance or accreditation reviews to ensure minimum standards for all its programmes

and/or institutions of higher learning. At the same time, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area now exist and European-level subject-specific review programmes (e.g. for engineering, chemistry and business management), some of which award so-called 'European Quality Labels', are emerging.

In order to be fully informed about the national procedures for quality assurance and accreditation in higher education in European countries, the project produced a detailed 'Overview and analysis in English of existing national accreditation and external quality assurance procedures in the EU'. Based on the information compiled on this overview, it was decided that instead of making different documents for the various stakeholders, systems and contexts, one overarching framework document would be developed, designed in such a way that it can be used in the following scenarios in quality assurance and accreditation processes at national level:

- where more information is sought about the subject area music, such as a list of experts
- where criteria for reviews of higher music education institutions or programmes are needed
- where criteria and procedures for reviews of higher music education institutions or programmes are sought

When the combined sections are read, the document contains a proposal for the establishment of an institutional and programme review scheme at European level conducted within the framework of the AEC.

Viewed in this way, the proposed framework document can be used in a highly flexible manner, taking into account the diversity of systems and approaches to quality assurance and accreditation in higher education that exist in Europe today. Therefore, the document should be able to assist European higher music institutions in their quality assurance or accreditation procedures and quality enhancement activities. The basic assumption, however, is that everything written in this document is based on a thorough understanding of the characteristics and needs of the higher music education sector. For example, the procedure clearly specifies visits to lessons, music performances and rehearsals with the aim of avoiding that this will be a 'paper exercise' only. This also assumes the review visit must be done by peers: in order to facilitate this, the project has developed a 'Register of experts', listing experts for the review panels and including guidelines on how experts will be selected.

### ***Some observations***

The work done in this area also identified the following issues.

#### *Raising awareness on quality issues in the sector*

The project helped to raise the awareness of quality assurance and accreditation issues in the sector by repeatedly putting these subjects on the agenda of congresses, meetings and the final project conference. One could say that a greater understanding now exists of the potential for quality enhancement of these processes, which has been strengthened by the work done in the project on the development of programme outcomes, criteria and procedures that are based on a thorough understanding of the needs and characteristics of the higher music education sector. In addition, a need for objective evaluations of institutions and programmes by 'critical friends' was clearly identified throughout the sector. A strong positive factor was the successful implementation of the pilot review visits, which were perceived as a rigorous but helpful process by the participating institutions.

At the same time, the pilot review visits clearly showed that the debate about the kind of quality being addressed (as mentioned above) was an important one and that when reviewing a higher music education institution a balance had to be found between musical quality issues and quality issues of a more general nature. For example, what to do when the review team finds an institution (as actually occurred during one pilot review) with high musical standards and graduates without any problems finding their way into the profession, but with a poorly developed internal quality assurance system according to the European Standards and Guidelines? Such questions will need to be addressed.

#### *Taking into account the national and European contexts*

As explained before, the approach suggested in the AEC framework document constitutes an approach to quality assurance and accreditation that is innovative and constructed in such a way that it can serve various contexts and various stakeholders. The suggested framework (or parts of it) can be used in national quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education. At the same time, when seen as a whole, it constitutes a complete European-level review programme for the evaluation of institutions and programmes in music. This is an approach that differs from other subject-specific systems: for example, the EUR-ACE system for engineering programmes is one that is highly decentralised and based on national procedures. The system existing in chemistry is organised with evaluation teams travelling throughout Europe without direct connections to national procedures. By choosing a middle way and taking into account both the national and European contexts, the approach suggested by music is one that builds bridges between both and can therefore serve as an example of good practice to other disciplines.

#### *Linguistic issues*

Another problem encountered in the project was the use of languages. Musicians are used to resolving problems related to languages, as they normally use music as the ultimate non-verbal way of communication for which no translation is needed. However, in this project, in which processes were developed with a high level of verbalisation in the criteria, programme outcomes, the self-evaluation documents and the visit reports, it was clear that in the European developments in quality assurance and accreditation, the issue of languages is a tremendous challenge, which will require further consideration in the future.

#### *International comparability*

Another unique feature of this project was the close alignment with the ERASMUS MUNDUS project 'Mundus Musicalis'<sup>5</sup>. In this project, partner institutions from all over the world addressed international recognition and comparability issues in higher music education, including issues related to quality assurance and accreditation. The AEC framework document on quality assurance and accreditation in higher music education was discussed by the 'Mundus Musicalis' working group throughout its development and was given valuable feedback that would increase its international comparability. One of the partners in this project, NASM, was in particular of great value to the development in the AEC accreditation project. NASM served as a consultative partner to the accreditation project, a role which will be continued in the future, e.g. by the establishment of joint evaluation panels.

#### *Future perspectives*

The project has also formulated a feasibility study, which describes how the work done in this area should be taken further. The study describes the current situation at the European level with regards to quality assurance, including the establishment of the European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies. In brief, the study explores a future strategy for the higher music education, trying to find a balance between the immediate needs of the sector in some countries and the current reality of the AEC.

<sup>5</sup> For more information about this project, see [www.aecinfo.org/mundus](http://www.aecinfo.org/mundus)

The feasibility study therefore suggests establishing an 'AEC Review Scheme' for the evaluation of institutions and programmes in music, similar to the programme developed by EUA, which in effect is a procedure focused on quality enhancement. Such an 'AEC Review Programme' would take place in the framework of the second cycle of the large ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia' for the period 2007-2010, which has recently been approved by the European Commission. In addition, an 'AEC quality assurance desk' should be established, where institutions, quality assurance and accreditation organisations and ministries could receive advice on quality assurance and accreditation procedures in higher music education, e.g. by offering the various stakeholders the criteria, procedures and register of experts developed in this project.

***What can higher education in Europe learn from this case study?***

Based on the results of the project, one of the main conclusions must be that any approach towards quality, 'quality culture', or formal quality assurance and accreditation procedures cannot be done without the framework of a specific discipline. Generic and non-specialist systems will therefore be less helpful, as they will be more inclined to focus on the assurance of a bureaucratic approach to quality and less on quality enhancement. It is our strong conviction that, as the Bologna Process is clearly entering a new phase, the further development of 'Bologna' must be sought in more subject-specific approaches.