



MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement:

Handbook for Critical Friend Review

A practical guide to the Critical Friend Review.
A process organised by MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement

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The purpose of the Critical Friend and his/her role in the review activities of MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement

An introduction to the Critical Friend Review

As part of its ambition to continuously improve its relevance and effectiveness, MusiQuE has started to offer institutions a new experimental approach to external review in addition to the regular external review model, which typically consists of a review visit by an external panel every 5 to 6 years and which is used by most quality assurance agencies. With this new approach, visits by Critical Friends are combined with a lighter version of MusiQuE's regular review visits.

Edglossary.com provides the following definition of a Critical Friend: *A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.* In the context of the MusiQuE review, a Critical Friend is also an external expert who is considered to be an international authority with regard to the content of the programme(s) or departments that are being reviewed. The Critical Friend can be given the assignment to visit and review a specific study programme, a cluster of similar programmes or a department/faculty/section offering more than one programme (e.g. when departments or sections are organised according to genres or disciplines that offer both bachelor and master level programmes [i.e. jazz, classical music, dance, etc.] or according to levels [e.g. bachelor or master]). He or she can also address a 'horizontal' or cross-sectoral theme, e.g. curriculum development, internationalisation, research, quality assurance, etc. The scope of the Critical Friend will depend on the needs and the organisational structure of the institution.

The Critical Friend is asked to perform his or her task during a visit of approximately three days. During this appointment, the Critical Friend will speak with management, teachers, students and non-academic staff (e.g. quality assurance officers) both individually and in small groups, visit classes, performances and examinations, sample written work and study relevant materials in order to get an impression of the quality of the programmes both in terms of artistic standards and educational quality. After such a visit, the Critical Friend will convey his or her findings in a concise report of about 5 to 7 pages, which should also include a set of concrete recommendations. This report will be structured along the MusiQuE Standards for Programme Review, and will be handed over to the institution for its internal quality enhancement purposes. Each department(s) or programme (or group of similar programmes) will be visited by a different Critical Friend with specific expertise on the content of the courses offered by the department or the programme(s). Over a period of several years, all departments or programmes offered by the institution should be visited twice, so that developments can be monitored.

Following these visits by the Critical Friends, a review visit by a team of external experts will take place, which will take into account the reports of the Critical Friends. In comparison to a regular review, the requirements for an institution in terms of preparation would be eased: instead of the usual self-evaluation report, the institution can



submit the reports written by the Critical Friends with brief responses from the institution containing information on what has been done with the recommendations made by the Critical Friends¹. In addition to these reports, an annotated list can be provided of all existing documentation relevant to the external review panel, such as curriculum overviews, module descriptions, quality assurance reports and various management information.

The Critical Friend Review provides an alternative, more flexible solution to the ever-present search for a balance between quality enhancement and quality control in external quality assurance processes. Even if the Critical Friends are asked to use the MusiQuE standards, their visits are primarily focused on quality enhancement, whereas the regular review visits can be more focused on the assessment of formal (national and MusiQuE) standards and requirements.

Because of its different setting, the Critical Friend Review requires a different attitude and set of skills from the external reviewers. In a formal review the panel will be mainly focussing on gathering information as part of review teams during meetings with larger groups of teachers and students within the framework of a highly structured schedule that often is taking place under considerable time pressure. The Critical Friend will need to be able to find his or her own way into the institution, very often by meeting with individual students and members of the teaching and managerial staff in various settings that are much more informal and closer to the people and their actual tasks than the scheduled setting during a regular review. This requires a more pro-active and investigative attitude, who, even if he or she is provided with a detailed schedule for this his or her visit, will need to adapt to last minute changes and create his or her own meeting opportunities in respect to what he or she has seen, heard or felt during the stay. The Critical Friend will also need to have an important sensitivity for being able to operate as a reviewer in situations that are not primary focused on the review process but rather on teaching and learning process as such. The necessity of being able to assess both the artistic performance of the student as well as the procedure for the assessment, expects the external expert to possess the knowledge and skills in both artistic and educational issues. From the perspective of MusiQuE as a quality assurance organisation, this dual background is being incorporated in the selection and the training of peer reviewers.

Finally, the Critical Friend Review fits well with the trend of a gradual development towards external quality assurance processes at institutional level, which is visible in many European countries. In this trend, institutions are given more responsibility to develop their own internal quality assurance processes at programme and departmental level, the working of which they will need to explain in the institutional level review procedures. MusiQuE's combined approach of the Critical Friends and the review team visit can very well serve as an effective model for the quality assurance of programmes or departments within multi-disciplinary higher education institutions. In such a context, it will in fact have the status of being an internal quality assurance procedure within the institutional level review process but one with a strong external dimension. This combined approach is in line with ESG 1.10 on cyclical

¹ This is consistent with ESG 3.2, which states that external quality processes should include "a self-assessment or equivalent".



external quality assurance, which acknowledges that “external quality assurance may take different forms and focus at different organisational levels (such as programme, faculty or institution)” (ESG, 2015, p.16).

Linking internal and external quality

A review by a Critical Friend is an opportunity for a programme or department to secure feedback with the active involvement of institutional stakeholders, such as heads, teachers and students, in an informal yet productive manner. The Critical Friend is an important tool in linking the internal and external quality assurance cycles designed to integrate the envisaged quality culture within institutions. In contrast to an accreditation which typically covers entire programmes, a Critical Friend is a professional peer whose visit focuses entirely on the performance of a specific programme, section or department. Consequently, the results of the visit and the feedback are more specific, more personal and more recognisable. MusiQuE has consciously chosen to adopt the system of using Critical Friend as its response to the – often technocratic – focus on quality assurance in higher education, paving the way for the development of a genuine quality culture in institutions with the ultimate aim to shift quality assurance from bureaucratic and abstract processes to a discourse about the quality of the content of the education.

Furthermore, the report of the Critical Friend allows us to integrate external perceptions of the quality of the programme or department into the internal quality assurance cycle, for example through the views expressed by a Critical Friend (on the basis of his or her personal frame of reference) as a result of discussions with teachers and students regarding the quality of specific aspects of the programme, such as exams and the curriculum. These conversations and the ensuing feedback report generate ideas for specific improvements, which heads can then discuss with the teachers and students before drafting a formal response to the Critical Friend's report in the form of an improvement plan. The feedback report and the department's or programme's response together can constitute an important source of information for any regular improvement plan the department or programme needs to make as part of their regular internal quality assurance process.

Inviting the Critical Friend to visit again three years later to review how the department or programme has responded to his/her recommendations guarantees that the improvement process will continue on a permanent basis. This second visit also culminates in a feedback report. To safeguard the objectivity of the process, at the end of one full cycle a new Critical Friend is invited (*see annex 1: Selection Criteria for Critical Friend*). To guarantee the necessary objectivity in the assessment, the selection of Critical Friend and the monitoring of the process is delegated to MusiQuE.

The Critical Friend Review explained step-by-step

This approach proposed by MusiQuE aims at providing a continuous external review process of programmes, institutions or departments. The cycle consists of two parts:

Site-visit of the Critical Friend(s), scope and number will depend on the organisational structure and needs of the institution.

Site-visit of a review team at the end of the cycle to finalise the review of a programme, institution or department considering the results of the Critical Friend visits. In some cases, this final visit can also serve as an official review visit leading to a formal accreditation or evaluation of a programme or institution/department in the framework of national legislation for accreditation or evaluation.

The entire Critical Friend approach cycle covers two series of six steps (and sometimes seven) over a period of five to six years².

Step 1: Preparation

At the start of the new academic year, the management of the institution or department meets with quality assurance officers to discuss the current situation and to plan possible activities connected with the visit of a Critical Friend'. Issues to be discussed at this meeting include the level on which the Critical Friend will be invited such as department-, section- or faculty level, programme or 'horizontal' or cross-sectoral level). It will also have to be clarified what topics or on which specific issues feedback is requested (e.g. curriculum, administrative workflows, internationalisation). Finally an appropriate time for the visit(s) is decided upon. On the basis of these talks, MusiQuE is asked to find suitable and independent candidates who are willing to visit the department as a Critical Friend'.

In consultation with the organisational unit, suitable dates are found for the visit, that will last for two or three days, depending on the size of the programme or the department. During the site-visit the Critical Friend must be allowed to form the broadest possible impression of the programme's or department's performance. This also means that it should be made possible that he or she can attend assessments; the visit will often be scheduled around examination periods.

In preparation for the visit, the curriculum, any departmental plans and/or other relevant existing documents the Critical Friend should be provided with are sent to the Critical Friend one month before the visit, together with the guidelines for writing a feedback report. These *Guidelines for Critical Friends*³ have been drafted on the basis of the relevant MusiQuE criteria for a programme review⁴. The head of the department or programme can also send

² The length of a full 'critical friend' cycle will depend on the needs and planning of the institution, and the number of 'critical friends' involved. A minimum of 4 and a maximum of 7 years is recommended.

³ See annex 3: Guidelines for Critical Friends.

⁴ The MusiQuE standards for programme assessment are based on part of 1 of the *ESG standards and guidelines*.



additional information (e.g. a strategy document or reports of surveys/focus groups) at this time. Naturally, in preparation for the second visit by the Critical Friend (to review what has been done with the feedback provided three years earlier), the department's response to the original feedback (e.g. an improvement plan) should also be sent.

The visit by the Critical Friend should also be announced to teachers and students as well as the issues being raised during the site-visit. In this way, teachers and students are actively involved in the Critical Friend visit and in drawing up the agenda for the visit. To achieve the best outcome of this procedure, transparency and close communication is crucial during this time of preparation.

Checklist of actions in step 1:

- Plan a meeting between the management and the quality assurance office to establish scope and purpose.
- Ask MusiQuE to identify and approach suitable candidates to act as Critical Friend.
- Discuss the Critical Friend' visit with teachers and students.
- Set the actual date of the visit.
- Arrange the flight and a hotel for the Critical Friend in consultation with MusiQuE.
- Send background information and Guidelines to the Critical Friend.

Step 2: The Critical Friend visit and report

The agenda for the site-visit should be finalised several weeks before it is due to take place. The head of the department acts as the Critical Friend's host and main contact person during the visit. There are several standard elements that should appear in the programme of the visit:

- The Critical Friend should be welcomed on the first day by the head of the department or programme and the quality assurance officer, followed by a conversation with the head of the department or programme (possibly including a guided tour) to discuss the scope of the visit, discuss the current situation in the department or programme and possible changes of the agenda. If necessary, the schedule can be revised, for example, in response to specific wishes of the Critical Friend.
- On the first day a meeting with the quality assurance officer(s) to discuss the role of the Critical Friend in relation to the institutional strategy on quality assurance should take place. The guidelines for writing the feedback report are also reviewed with further elaboration if necessary.
- To gain an impression of the quality of the examinations and the examination candidates, the Critical Friend should be able to observe assessments, preferably by personally attending both examinations and the deliberations of the assessment panels.
- The Critical Friend must have an opportunity to attend a selection of group lessons (e.g. theory, pedagogy, etc.) and lessons in the main subject. It will often be useful to reserve a number of hours in the programme, allowing the Critical Friend to attend a number of lessons of his or her own choice.



- A meeting with students should always be organised with the Critical Friend as a guest. It should address all those issues that students would like to discuss within an adequate timeframe. However, there should be enough time for questions from the Critical Friend.
- There should always be a meeting between the Critical Friend and teachers.
- Where possible, a lunch or dinner should be planned with the institution's senior management.
- At the end of the final day of the visit, a brief meeting should be arranged with the head of the department and/or the quality assurance office to conclude the visit with a brief feedback.

The Critical Friend should submit his/her feedback report within six weeks of the visit. The head of the department, a member of the senior management and the quality assurance office then meet to investigate whether the report contains factual inaccuracies or matters that need further clarification. If so, the Critical Friend will be asked to revise those aspects of the report. The final report will then be adopted.

Checklist of actions in step 2

- Develop an agenda for the visit.
- Reserve appropriate rooms and locations for lunch/dinner.
- Prepare and organise a meeting with students during the visit.
- Inform the relevant teachers of the attendance by the Critical Friend at lessons and assessments.
- Send the agenda to the Critical Friend and enquire about any additional requests.
- Discuss the findings of the final report internally by head of the department and suggest additions/revisions.

Step 3: Discussion of the report with teachers and students

The head of the department discusses the final report with teachers and students. This process may take several months.

Checklist of actions in step 3

- Circulate the Critical Friend's report among students and teachers.
- Organise a meeting with teachers and students to discuss the findings.

Step 4: Formulation of a response to the report and implementation of improvements within the department

After the report has been studied and discussed within the organisational unit, the head of the department will write a formal response setting out the actions that will be taken on the basis of the feedback within the next three years (Improvement plan or action plan). The head of the department's response should be written within three months and discussed with senior management and quality assurance officials. When the formal response has been finalised, it is sent to the Critical Friend and circulated in the same way as the Critical Friend's report (see above).

The department's response provides important input for its plans for the next three years, ensuring that the proposed actions remain 'live issues' which are reviewed regularly.



Checklist of actions in step 4:

- Write a response to the Critical Friend report (improvement or action plan).
- Distribute the plan among the teachers, students and the institution more widely.

Step 5: Contribution to the self-evaluation and overall review by a MusiQuE review team

When it is time for the six-yearly review visit by a MusiQuE review team, the Critical Friend is asked to play an active part in the process. The earlier feedback reports and ensuing improvement/action plans by the departments are compiled into a self-evaluation document, which the review team can use to form a clear and differentiated impression of the quality of the department or programme as a whole. Critical Friends should contact the review team directly during or around the time of the visit (i.e. by Skype). This allows them to make an active and important contribution to the review process and ensures that the panel considers every facet of the department or programme.

Essential in the planning of the visit of the MusiQuE review team is that the team is not expected to repeat the work of the Critical Friends. The assessment of the review team should be based on the reports written by the Critical Friends, the materials provided by the institution and brief conversations with stakeholders during their visit to clarify certain issues. As a result, it is not expected that the visit of the review team needs the same setup and length as a standard MusiQuE programme or institutional review visit: it can be envisaged that the visit is shorter and only meant to further deepen or explore issues that have been noticed by the Critical Friends and/or to identify areas which the Critical Friends have not been able to pursue. The main tasks of the review team are to establish if all MusiQuE criteria for programme or institutional review have been met, based on the reports of the Critical Friends and further evidence collected during the visit of the review team.

This final step is taken during the preparations for a site-visit by a MusiQuE review team.

Checklist of actions in step 5

- Use the Critical Friend's report and the department's improvement plan in the preparations for the MusiQuE review visit (in the self-evaluation document, during preliminary discussions, etc.).
- Notify the Critical Friend of the forthcoming review and request a contribution (and send the relevant documents).
- Set a date and a time prior to the review team visit for a meeting between the Critical Friend and the review panel.
- Organise practical aspects of this meeting (Skype facilities, venue, etc.).

Repeating the steps

When step 5 and the visit of the MusiQuE review team have been completed, the cycle starts again with step 1, three years after the last visit by a Critical Friend. On the first occasion this takes the form of a return visit by the Critical Friend to assess what has been done with the feedback three years earlier. When all five or six steps have



been taken twice with the same Critical Friend, three years after his or her last visit a new expert will be asked to perform the same role for the next six years.



Annex 1: Selection criteria for a Critical Friend

The professional background of a Critical Friend must be fitting to the programme to be assessed in order to ensure actual peer review.⁵ Critical Friends are independent, authoritative in the field of higher music education and have the following current expertise:

Subject matter expertise: The candidate has substantial insight into current developments in higher music education and the programme concerned. He or she shows substantial understanding of his/her own field, and actively contributes to the development of the discipline and/or the professional practice. This is demonstrated by a manifest recognition as a peer or professional, and/or a leading role in higher music education.

Educational expertise: The candidate must have relevant educational expertise in the same orientation and at the same level (Bachelor's or Master's) as the programme to be visited. This expertise may be reflected in a recent and relevant position in education, recent experience in designing curricula or a direct management role in higher education programmes (i.e. in the position of programme manager or team leader). Furthermore, it is important to have sufficient affinity and certain experience with the teaching concept of the programme to be visited. All of these requirements are intended to ensure a meaningful exchange between the Critical Friend, the teachers and the students.

International expertise: The candidate must be capable of drawing substantive comparisons with current curricula of related programmes abroad whose orientation and level are similar. He or she must possess insight into the curricula of foreign programmes, gained through, for example, a recent (multi-year) teaching term at a similar or related programme abroad or by contributions to international higher music education projects.

Professional field expertise: The candidate must have a proper overview of the requirements set by the professional field for starting professionals. Professional field expertise may be demonstrated by, inter alia, a position at a representative employer, extensive experience as a work placement supervisor, or involvement in sector organisations. Insight into the requirements that the international professional practice sets for graduates may be gained through, for example, a position with a foreign or multinational employer, or an international organisation, with additional international activities, or experience in an international professional or umbrella organisation.

In addition, existing members of the MusiQuE register should update their familiarity with MusiQuE's standards and procedures by taking part periodically (preferably no less frequently than every five years) in the training for peer reviewers regularly offered by MusiQuE.

⁵ In accordance with the rules for the MusiQuE peer reviewers register and ESG 2015, Standard 2.4.

Annex 2: Guidelines for Critical Friend reports

These guidelines provide guidance to Critical Friends when writing their review report. All four areas of investigation should be covered, as well as a list of recommendations for improvement.

1. Goals, Design and Delivery of the Study Programme(s)

Your opinion about the clarity of the goals and rationale of the study programme.

Your opinion on the content, structure and international orientation of the study programme and its methods of delivery, and how it encourages students to shape their own learning environment (student-centred learning), and how it provides them with performance opportunities.

Your opinion on the relation between the quality of the graduating students (learning outcomes) and the requirements of the discipline and of the (international) professional field.

Your opinion about the role of (artistic) research in the programme.

Your opinion on how assessment methods demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes.

Your opinion on the selection of suitable students, the monitoring and review of their progression, achievement and subsequent (international) employability.

2. Teaching & Learning Environment

Your opinion on the quality and number of teaching staff and on their (international) qualifications for their role (artists/pedagogues/researchers).

Your opinion on the level to which facilities, resources and support staff constitute a coherent and optimal teaching-learning environment for the students.

3. Quality Culture

Your opinion on the extent to which the organisational structure allows for efficient decision-making and effective internal communication.

Your opinion on the quality assurance and enhancement procedures that are in place.

4. Public Interaction

Your opinion on the engagement of the programme with society (in cultural, artistic and educational contexts) and the contributions made at local, national and international level.

Your opinion on the interaction with the profession (music and other artistic professions), including the assessment and monitoring of its ongoing needs.

Your opinion about the clarity and consistency of information given to the public (potential students, concerts audiences, parents, other interested stakeholders, etc.).

Based on the analyses above (1-4), please write down your suggestions for improvement measures

1.

2.

3.

Etc....

