

How can MusiQuE's standards and methodology inspire student-centredness in curriculum design?

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Foreword

About MusiQuE

MusiQuE (Music Quality Enhancement) is an international organization focused on improving the quality of music education. It helps institutions enhance their practices through reviews, consultations, and accreditations. Its primary goal is to help institutions become the best versions of themselves by following clear and collaborative quality enhancement standards. These standards guide institutions in aligning their missions, strategies, and policies with continuous improvement. For more information, visit musique-qe.eu.

What Are Quality Enhancement Standards?

Quality enhancement standards help institutions ensure their education meets high expectations and evolves with societal and student needs. MusiQuE has different set of standards, on which all reviews are based. They are aligned with the [European Standards and Guidelines \(ESG\)](#), the common reference for recognized accreditation agencies in Europe. [The MusiQuE Standards](#) look over four domains: institutional responsibilities, educational processes, learning resources and student support, and quality culture. Paying a particular attention to student centredness and how research is implemented throughout the curriculum, they emphasize collaboration, transparency, and innovation in education. The Standards for Institutional Reviews will serve as a basis for this paper.

1 - What is Student-Centredness?

Student-centredness is a key principle in the ESGs, encouraging institutions to prioritize the active involvement of students in their learning process. It emphasizes students as "actors" and "creators" of their education, rather than passive recipients or "agents". The ESG 1.3 states that *"Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes."*

Within the MusiQuE Standards, this student centredness is principally reflected in two standards:

- **Standard 1.3** highlights involving students in decision-making processes. One sentence is particularly important in that respect: *“There are effective mechanisms in place to involve institutional stakeholders in policy and programme design, and decision-making processes”*. Students are among those institutional stakeholders, with full right to express their voice, particularly in designing the programme, but, as we will see in the next standard, also their learning process.
- **Standard 2.1**, indeed, specifies that *“The institution ensures that its programmes are delivered in a way that enable students to take an active role in creating the learning process and to engage in critical reflection throughout their studies. The achievement of intended learning outcomes is facilitated through an appropriate and effective blend of teaching and learning styles and pedagogies. The programmes and their methods of delivery are adequately catered by staff and support services”*. “Playing an active role in creating the learning process”: clearly, this sentence emphasizes that students can be at the center, not only at the center of the surrounding attention of the organization, but as the center initiating the education process, acting as “creators”, “authors” of the learning path. Engaged in critical reflection, they have a voice in their education: shaping their goals, addressing the relevant learning outcomes to reach them, collaborating in that process with teachers. This approach aligns with European priorities to foster independence, creativity, and personal growth in students.

As said in the foreword, MusiQuE also supports the “personal” growth of the institutions, not benchmarking institutions against pre-defined standards they should reach, but helping them reach their own goals. How does MusiQuE operate to achieve that objective?

2 - What Does MusiQuE Do?

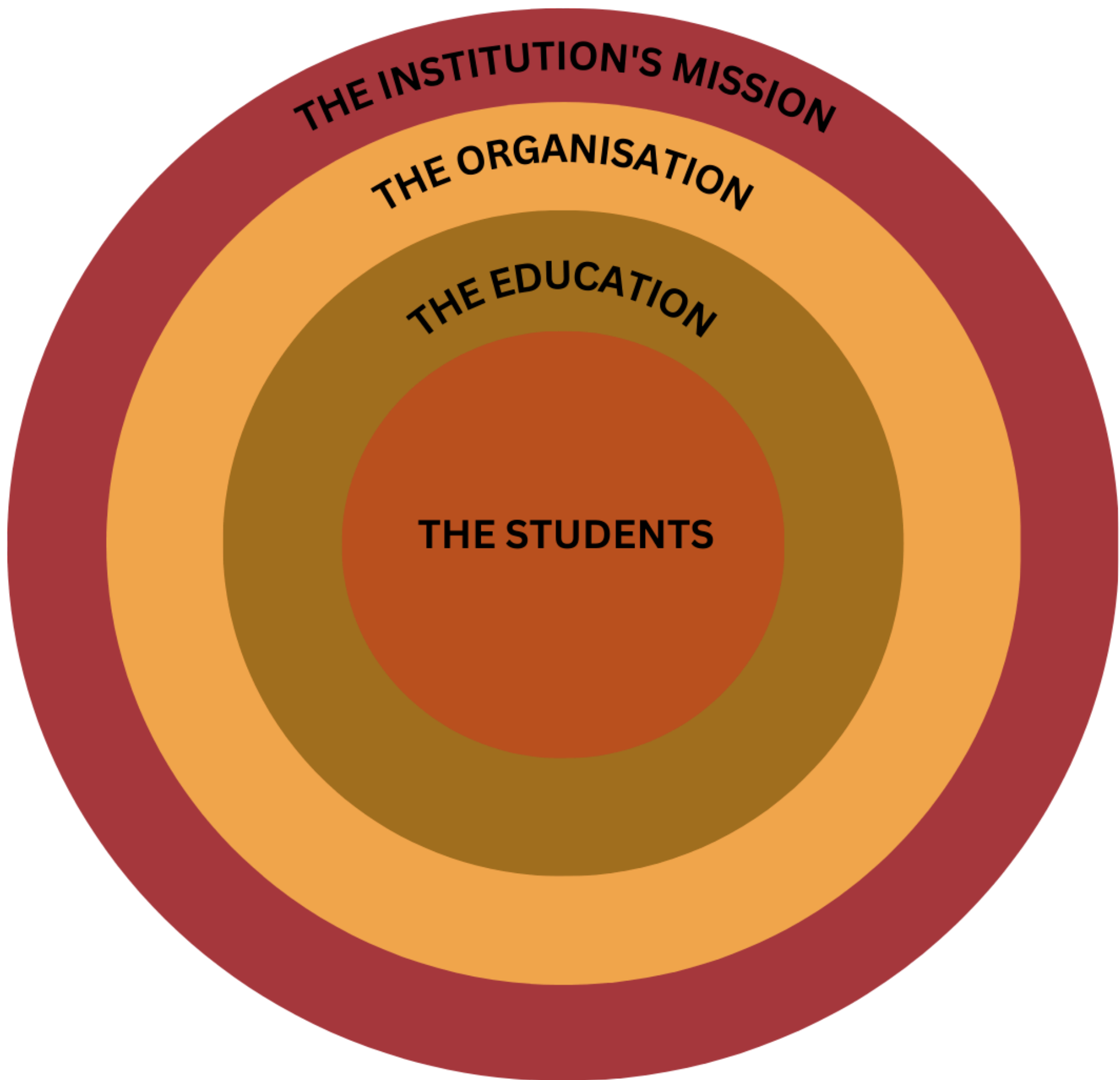
MusiQuE bases its collaboration on standards structured to express the attention it pays to operate within the scope that institution defines for itself. So, the first chapter of the Standards is about understanding what the institution seeks to be, what are its values and goals, what it offers and how organically this is decided:

1. Understanding Missions, Standard 1.1: *“The institutional mission, vision, values, and goals are clearly stated and relevant to the national and legal context in which the institution operates. They are effectively implemented through coherent institutional strategies and policies.”*

The educational goals, Standard 1.2: *"The educational goals of the institution are clearly stated and achieved through the structure and content of its education policy and the study programmes."*

Sharing reflection and decisions, by promoting collaboration, Standard 1.3: *"The decision-making processes are clear, transparent and effective. The institution has an appropriate organisational structure, including a relevant representation of institutional stakeholders (students, teaching staff, support staff, representatives of the music profession and related artistic domains). There are effective mechanisms in place to involve institutional stakeholders in policy and programme design, and decision-making processes."*

The student voice is, in a way, a recent development in higher music education. For decades, a traditional "top-down" model was effective, as shown here:



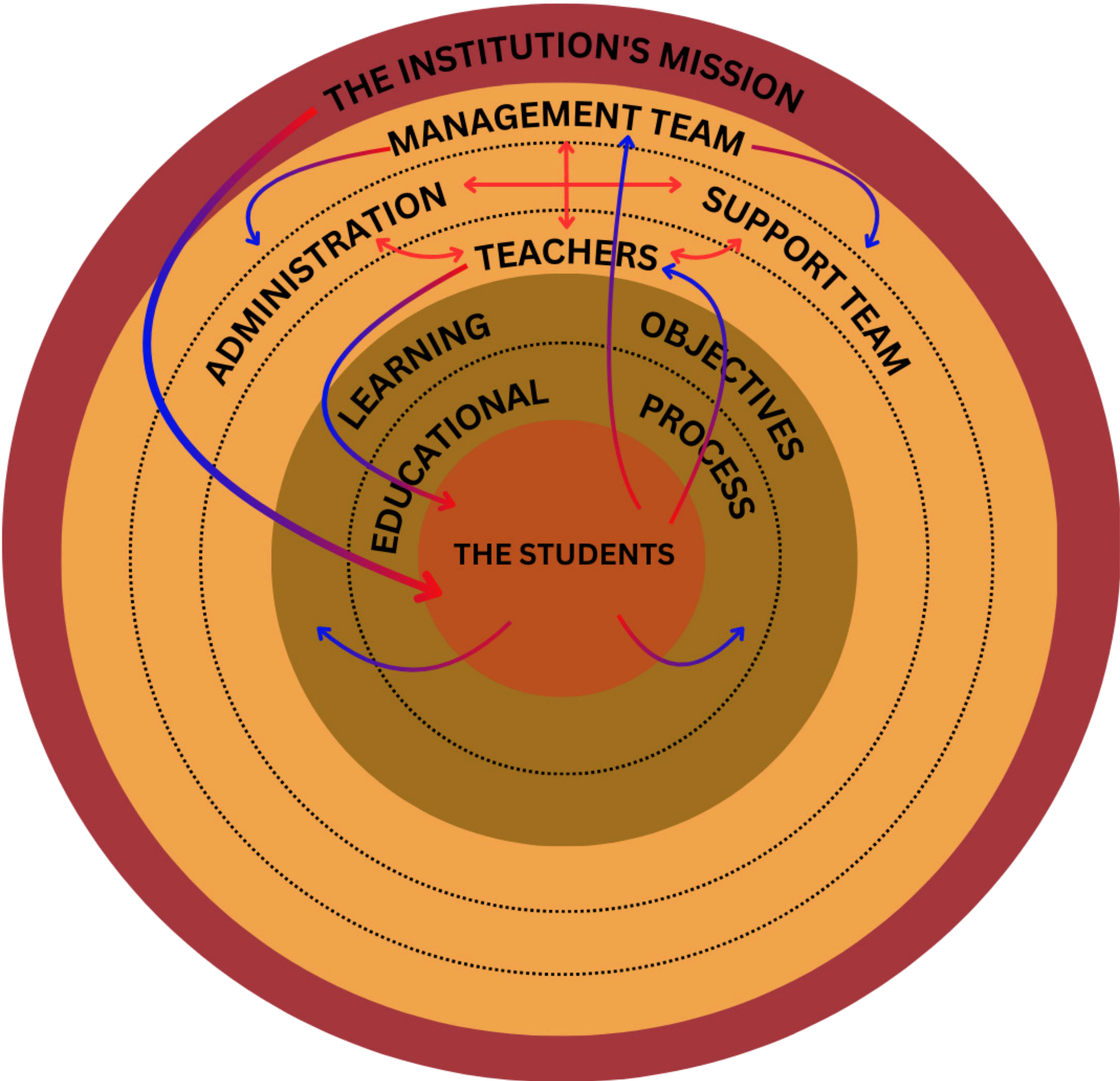
In this model, the student is perfectly at the center of the figure. However, we can't speak of student centredness, because even if it doesn't mean that the voice of student is not heard, it just means that the students are not considered to have any word on what is built for them, to have them fit for the professional purpose that, at one time, was mainly as orchestral players: Students had to be perfect "agents", fit for that professional purpose. It is kind of a centripetal force that "shapes" the student.

The evolutions of the sector in recent decades drove towards diversification of the artistic portfolio of the students, with an increasing attention to the freelance artists position, with many diverse possibilities: “there are no wrong artists” is a motto that the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne managed to have their students understand as soon as Bachelor 1. This implies two different considerations:

1. Extending the institutional missions and having them reflected in the educational goals. The institutions extended their missions, to date considering four major ones: artistic quality, quality of the educational processes, research, social engagement. All of them possibly expressed in the Learning Outcomes of the programmes.

0. Enhancing models where students, staff, and management collaborate. This is a direct expression of that student centredness expressed in chapter 1, where students are considered as full stakeholders of the organisation.

The Figure 2 gives an image of those two shifts:



In this figure, the model of figure 1 is not totally reversed, but the arrows emanating from the centre—the students—represent that essential centrifugal force that balances that centripetal force symbolized in figure 1. Allowed to activate that force, the students are then, instead of being shaped, able to shape their learning themselves, and, why not consequently, the institution.

From this figure, we can express some of the main questions MusiQuE addresses to the institution: What are the missions, how are they reflected in the Learning Outcomes of the programmes, how effective and transparent is the communication between all those acting within the institution, to what extent are students part of the decision loop, what kind of Teaching and Learning relationship do they have with their teachers, etc.

In figure 2, we can distinguish two sets of arrows: those 'top-down' reaching the students and those (speaking in traditional but inaccurate terms) 'bottom-up' coming from the students. The importance given to each is part of the Quality Culture of the institution: nearly 100% on the downward arrows, we go back to figure 1. A balance between directions, we reach the student centredness. If, on the other hand, major importance is given mostly to those arrows coming from the students, letting them always take the lead could be understood as reaching the business model where the "client" is king. That is not what is understood when expressing that students should *"take an active role in creating the learning process"*; it is not what is understood here when students are said to be "creators" or "authors" of their development. But still, giving an increasing importance to those arrows is the unique way to allow them to become themselves by themselves, become "the best version of themselves". The example of the way MusiQuE is implementing that concept in respect of the reviewed institutions helps understand a possible way of achieving that.

3 - Suggestions for Curriculum Design, based on MusiQuE's standards and methodology

In a speech during the AEC 2024 Congress, MusiQuE expressed two things: first that its mission was to play the role of a mirror for the institutions so as to better know themselves and thus, be able to improve themselves by themselves. And secondly, that MusiQuE was not quietly standing there holding the mirror but side by side with the institution to support it in that journey, a journey dedicated to the research of oneself.

That word research resonates with some aspect of MusiQuE Standards.

Within Standard 2.1, two guiding questions are drawing attention to that topic of research:

- Guiding question d) *"How are students encouraged to engage in critical reflection throughout their studies?"*

- Guiding question e) *"How is research addressed from the 1st to the 3rd cycle? How does research inform curriculum development, teaching and learning at the level of the institution?"*

And within Standard 3.1 about staff qualification:

- Guiding question d) *"How are teaching staff encouraged to engage in ongoing critical reflection?"*

- Guiding question e) *"How is teaching staff encouraged to engage with research both in their teaching and in their professional development?" [emphasis mine]*

Research, and Artistic Research, can be considered as an activity for which students need to be prepared. That is expressed in training "to" or "for" research. In education, the concept of research-based learning means training "by" research, learning through research-based settings. The guiding question d) of standard 2.1, quoted above, expresses that research can be addressed from the 1st cycle to the 3rd cycle. That means starting with training "by" research and to reach, in the scope of the 3rd cycle level, training "to" and "for" research. But in all cases, using research methodologies which means at least: inquiring into a field, a topic, a question with a first idea, hypothesis that can evolve; producing a result; reporting on the process. In the scope of its reviews, MusiQuE is focusing on the quality of the processes. In the scope of a training "by" research, the scope is equally on the quality of the process as it is on the result. Within that process, as expressed by John Dewey, what is learnt through the process is even more important than the result. This is the scope in which a students can become "authors" of their path, "creators" of themselves by themselves , a way of expressing the German concept of "Bildung".

If we consider that the MusiQuE's model can inspire such a curriculum innovation, key takeaways can include:

1. Empowering Students: In the scope of the institution's offer, start with students' aspirations, define fields they wish to inquire into but also see what unknown other fields—inside the institution or outside—they could explore in order to broaden their scope and possibly discover new abilities, perspectives, accepting in advance the risk of failure (because learning from some failure is often important) ; and from there choosing the corresponding Learning outcomes on which to focus.

2. Integrating Research: Engage students in that learning "by" research, encouraging exploration and critical thinking through a continuous assessment of the process implemented and the results achieved.

3. Rethinking Roles of Teachers: Teachers act as mentors, securing the process, guiding the students' journeys while maintaining oversight on the achievement of Learning Objectives, among them the academic and artistic standards; but also, of course and as much as requested, acting in their capacity of delivering the required knowledge and advices from their own experience.

In that process, teachers act as teams to support the student in all the aspects of this path. These diverse roles explain why Standard 3.1 insist in their engagement “in ongoing critical reflection” and with research “both in their teaching and in their professional engagement”.

This approach aligns with some educational philosophies fostering the autonomy of the student through discovery. This approach can call an extensive use of self-reflectiveness by:

- Allowing the student to express questions like: What? Why? How? When? What do I want to learn; why I want to learn it; how I would like to learn it, experience it; what result I expect, hope, to achieve; how I would like to be assessed; what I learnt from the experience.
- Getting the teachers to use the same kind of questions: what did you experience? Why did you decide on this experience, this learning? How did you experience it? What result did you achieve? How did you reach that result? How do you assess the whole process? What did you learn? And the most important ones: if relevant, what would you do differently? And finally: what do you need to learn now, what for you is the next step?

This is a way of doing, probably not the unique one but possibly applicable to any learning setting. But this is certainly a way of allowing students to play a role in their own development, allowing – in respect of that student-centeredness proposition – to be creative partners in their learning path. This approach is also close to and perfectly fitted for project-based learning, rooted on contract-based settings—settings in which an agreement based on all those questions is symbolically, or in reality, established between the teacher and the learner.

From this perspective, curriculum innovation may be less about what we teach than how we teach it.

Conclusion

It can easily be understood that the concept of the students as “creators” or “authors” of their learning path, as presented here, is really demanding: on the one hand, the students are not consumers of the institution’s offers but “composers” of their personal path aided by the tools the institutions provides; in that sense, it is natural that they can also help the institution shape those tools. On the other hand, teachers need, in some cases, to adopt new attitudes, new roles, alongside their high level of knowledge and experience. This is one of the reasons why MusiQuE includes students, as well as teachers, in the loop of the Quality Enhancement methodology.

Quality Enhancement and curricular innovation not only benefit from, but are for their success dependent on, their active engagement in the design and development of the curriculum, as well as in its implementation and execution. Through its standards and processes, MusiQuE offers a framework and a methodology that can be an inspiration as well as a goal in this respect.

« RETURN TO CHAPTER

This article is part of a broader publication developed by the ARTEMIS Capacity-Building Working Group (2022–2025): [*Innovating Curricula – Building Capacity for Innovation in Higher Music Education Institutions*](#), which brings together perspectives from across the European higher music education community on innovation and reform in curriculum design.