Why respecting diversity and creativity is essential in quality assurance and accreditation processes – observations and experiences in the field of music

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Abstract

In line with the EQAF's objective to address how internal and external quality assurance approaches take account of institutional diversity and support creativity in higher education, this paper shares several observations based on the experiences gained with quality assurance and accreditation issues in the field of music. 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 than other higher education institutions. Music is also a discipline that has taken a pro-active approach to quality assurance and accreditation at the European level. The observations clearly show the necessity 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.

Setting the stage

The main goal of the EQAF 2009 is 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 is in line with other current initiatives at the European level that equally address these issues. For example, the EUA project 'Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda – QAHECA'[1] has made several important recommendations in this respect, while the 'U-Map' project[2] has shown the vast diversity in European higher education through its attempts 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 than 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*[3], which will be published by the 'Tuning' Project later this year. As can be seen in the next paragraph, music is also a discipline that has taken a pro-active approach towards quality assurance and accreditation: through its *Institutional and Programme Review Scheme*[4] and its close collaboration with various national quality assurance and accreditation agencies, the leading representative European organisation of the sector, the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC)[5], 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.

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[1] See for more information about this project http://www.eua.be/quality-assurance/qaheca/.

[2] See for more information about this project http://www.u-map.eu/.

[3] 'Polifonia' Bologna Working Group; Linda Messas & Martin Prchal (eds.) (2009): Higher Music Education. Summary of Tuning Findings. AEC. Utrecht.

[4] See for more information about this scheme http://www.bologna-and-music.org/reviewscheme .

[5] For more information about the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), see http://www.aecinfo.org.

Quality assurance and accreditation in the field of music

The AEC started to address quality assurance and accreditation in music in 2002 in the framework of the project 'Music Study, Mobility and Accountability'[6] undertaken in co-operation with the National Association of Schools of Music (a formal accrediting body in higher music education in the US)[7] 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. In order to ensure that external quality assurance and accreditation procedures in Europe would take into account the particular characteristics of music study, a European and music-specific approach to quality assurance and accreditation was developed by the AEC in the project 'Accreditation in European Professional Music Training'[8], initiated in 2006 and supported by the SOCRATES programme. The project produced a comprehensive framework document entitled *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education: Characteristics, Criteria and Procedures*[9] with characteristics, reference points, criteria[10], 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'[11] is in charge of promoting, monitoring and further developing the use of the AEC Framework Document in both (formal) national procedures and (informal) procedures in the AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme. The early development of these quality assurance and accreditation activities in the field of music was described in more detail in the paper *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Music as a Case Study*[12] for the EQAF 2007.

The *AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme* is designed as a European subject-specific peer review system in the music field and consists of review visits performed by panels of experts with the aim to provide 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 (Belgrade, Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Cetinje and Novi Sad) 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 during the spring of 2008 in the framework of the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia', during which the Conservatorio Superior de Musica "E. Martinez Torner" in Oviedo and the Prince Claus Conservatoire in Groningen were reviewed. The visited institutions provided positive feedback about the reviews and in particular regarding the competence of the experts in the music fields, the relevance of the AEC criteria and the experts' questions, remarks and suggestions for the institution, as well as the supportive atmosphere resulting from the critical but friendly panel. For 2010, reviews of 1 institution in the UK, 4 in Poland, 1 in Portugal and 1 in Cyprus are scheduled.

In addition to the informal procedures performed within this scheme, the AEC framework is increasingly being used by national quality assurance or accreditation authorities in the preparation 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:

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[6] See for more information about this project http://msma.arts-accredit.org/.

[7] For more information about NASM, see http://nasm.arts-accredit.org/.

[8] See for more information about this project www.bologna-and-music.org/accreditation.

[9] This document can be found at www.bologna-and-music.org/reviewscheme.

[10] Please note that criteria for both institutional and programme reviews have been developed and included in the AEC Framework Document.

[11] See for more information about the 'Polifonia' project http://www.polifonia-tn.org.

[12] Prchal, M (2008): Quality assurance and accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Music as a case study. In: EUA Publication "Implementing and using quality assurance: strategy and practice". Brussels.

[13] See for more information about this project www.aecinfo.org/sida.

- 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 executes the procedure with the use of these criteria and experts. Such cooperation is in place with the Swiss Accreditation Agency OAQ for the accreditation of the music academies in Basel, Genève-Lausanne, Lugano and Luzern during 2009-2010, with the Romanian Accreditation Agency ARACIS for the accreditation of the National University of Music in Bucharest in 2009 and the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education in Lithuania for the accreditation of the Lithuanian Academy of Music in Vilnius during 2020.
- In other procedures, the criteria are firstly merged, after which the AEC assembles a committee of international experts 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 agency ACQUIN and was implemented for the first time for a programme review at the Musikhochschule Trossingen in April 2009, with other procedures being scheduled in Germany in the near future.

Apart from these activities initiated and implemented by the AEC, various members of the AEC community have been involved as peer experts in national quality assurance or accreditation procedures in higher music education in various countries, e.g. the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Austria and Belgium. 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 in- and outside the AEC in the framework of the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia'. This way, a wealth of information on national developments is collected, compared and analysed, helping the AEC to oversee the European quality assurance or accreditation landscape and take a position if necessary.

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 and accreditation processes.

Defining the term ´quality´
It can be observed that when addressing the term quality, a certain distinction of the various types of and approaches to quality in higher education can be identified:

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. As described in the above-mentioned paper *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Music as a Case Study*, music has developed a unique expertise on talking about and judging the quality of musical achievements through many years of experience in audition panels, competitions committees and selection procedures. This expertise is typically based on collective discussions and decisions on artistic and academic quality, and could serve as an example of good practice to other academic disciplines. However, less time and attention has been traditionally devoted to the second and third types of quality. As some quality assurance systems, and especially those that operate at the institutional level, mainly seem to focus on the second and third types of quality, a danger of a

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[14] See for more information about the 'Polifonia' Accreditation Working Group http://www.polifonia-tn.org/accreditation.

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 projects and initiatives have made reference to the need of 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 professional music schools and conservatoires with respect to music content and institutional mission, a review entity must:

> *"respect the natures, achievements, aspirations, and structures of individual institutions:*
> - *conduct evaluations with respect for, and in light of, the various missions, goals, objectives, and methodologies chosen by the individual institutions;*
> - *have a sophisticated understanding of how music schools and conservatoires are the same and how they are different;*
> - *respect the fact that various structures and approaches to music and music study work effectively and produce outstanding results."[15]*

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

> *"Quality assurance must, first of foremost, 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 they work in".[16]*

Both texts highlight the diversity that exists between institutions and sometimes even within the same discipline. 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 a few disciplines, it is clear that an understanding of diversity in relation to discipline, culture and context is essential in quality assurance and accreditation 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 witnessed in an institutional review of a small specialised institution in the UK), should therefore not be seen as examples of good practice. Such an approach forces small specialised institutions to invest a disproportioned part of their budget to set up a form of 'total quality management' with bureaucratic and 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 specialised institutions revolves around the issue of student involvement and feedback. The individual approach of the students in music institutions is intense and essential, with one-to-one teaching still one of the most effective methods of teaching in

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[15] AEC & NASM (2004): Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project - Characteristics of an Effective Evaluation System for Music Schools and Conservatoires. Page 4.

[16] EUA (2009): Improving quality, enhancing creativity – Change processes in European higher education institutions. Final Report of Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda (QAHECA) Project. Page 17.

higher music education. When asked about their learning experience, music students are usually very positive due to this highly individual approach. Usually, they also express their satisfaction of having sufficient ways to provide feedback to 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 to be 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 individual culture and may have a negative impact on the existing creative atmosphere. This does not mean that formal procedures are not important: they certainly have a role to play, but the role of informal feedback mechanisms, which in small institutions can sometimes be very effective, should not be ruled out. In the QAHECA project final report, it is clearly 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".*[17]

Separating content and process
Some quality assurance systems (and especially those that operate 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 and progression 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 and accreditation is constantly developing further: more and more quality assurance experts emerge, panel experts 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 to 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, the danger emerges that the quality process separates itself from every day reality and becomes an abstract superficial circus with a goal in itself.

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. Nevertheless, 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. In a way, it is a strange paradox that while higher education institutions are being asked in the framework of the Bologna process to

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[17] EUA (2009): Improving quality, enhancing creativity – Change processes in European higher education institutions. Final Report of Quality Assurance for the Higher Education Change Agenda (QAHECA) Project. Page 20.

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. There should be much more interaction between the agencies, e.g. to exchange suggestions on peer experts. Or how about a European exchange programme for quality assurance or accreditation officials?

Questions to be addressed during the discussion
- What are your experiences in quality assurance or accreditation with the diversity of higher education institutions?
- Would you be in favour of generic quality assurance or accreditation procedures or those that are more attuned to the context of the institution or programme?
- How do you see the issue of separating content from process?
- Would you agree to systems should be devised that are more sensitive to disciplinary and contextual consideration and work at the European level?

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Relevant websites
www.bologna-and-music.org/accreditation
www.polifonia-tn.org
http://msma.arts-accredit.org
www.aecinfo.org
www.doremifasocrates.org
www.studymusicineurope.org