



## **10th European Quality Assurance Forum**

**19-21 November 2015**

**Quality Assurance Agency and UCL Institute of Education**

**London, UK**

### **Taking stock and looking forward**

**Paper presented during EQAF 2015**

#### **Authors**

**Name:** Martin Prchal

**Position:** Vice-Principal

**Organisation:** Royal Conservatoire, University of the Arts, The Hague

**Country:** The Netherlands

#### **Short bio:**

Martin Prchal is vice-principal at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, the Netherlands, with responsibilities for curriculum development, quality assurance and international relations. Trained as a musician of Czech origin, he holds teaching and performance diplomas (violoncello) and a MA in musicology. In his previous position as Chief Executive of the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC), Martin developed a substantial expertise in EU project management through his involvement in several music projects in various EU programmes. His expertise on higher music education in Europe, and the Bologna Declaration and its implications for higher music education is internationally acknowledged. In the area of quality assurance, Martin has served on the boards of the Swiss agency OAQ (now AAQ) and the Flemish agency VLUHR KZ. Currently he is also chair of the board of 'MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement', a European-level foundation for reviews and accreditations in the field of higher music education.

**Name:** Linda Messas

**Position:** General Manager

**Organisation:** Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC)

**Country:** Belgium

#### **Short bio:**

Linda Messas is General Manager of the European Association of Conservatoires (Association Européenne des Conservatoires – AEC). She is running the Association together with the Chief Executive Officer. Since October 2014, she is also coordinating the newly established Foundation for Quality Enhancement and Accreditation in Higher Music Education, MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement.

Since 2007, when she joined AEC, Linda has been supporting the development and formalization of AEC's quality enhancement and accreditation activities through the



coordination of various projects and activities, including AEC Quality Enhancement Processes and joint accreditation procedures with quality assurance agencies across Europe. She has also participated as secretary in several review visits of higher music education institutions.

## **Proposal**

**Title: How to support Quality through International Activities - Case studies from the field of higher music education**

### **Abstract:**

One of the main concepts of the ESG is that they are European. Nevertheless, even if they provide a framework for quality assurance in the entire EHEA, the ESG also apply to quality assurance activities with a very limited international scope. In their Part 1, the word 'international' hardly features and no reference is being made towards the promotion of internationalisation activities (e.g. staff mobility or international benchmarking) as tools to support quality assurance.

By providing examples from the field of higher music education, this article shows concrete ways in which quality assurance can be supported by international activities. After claiming that quality is only achieved through a focus on standards as well as on educational quality, the paper presents international activities which can help institutions to improve in these two areas, and ends by introducing an international approach to external quality assurance addressing both standards and educational quality.

### **Text of paper:**

#### ***The concept of quality: addressing both standards and educational quality***

The internationally oriented quality assurance activities described in this article are linked to a concept of quality culture which, according to the authors, addresses both standards and educational quality, i.e. standards in a particular academic or artistic discipline on the one hand and educational quality that includes generic issues (such as the organisation and management of the curriculum, governance, internal and external communication, and student involvement) on the other.



In the subject area of music, this distinction is translated into artistic standards for performance on the one hand and educational quality on the other. It is fair to say that an attention on educational quality has developed only recently in higher music education institutions and this development has been greatly influenced by the emergence of quality assurance as part of the Bologna process during the past decade. For decades, the main focus of the sector has been on artistic standards, for example in the way the institutions assess their students through concert performances and the importance given to music competitions. In a way, engaging with quality is an intrinsic part of music performance and creation. All of 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>1</sup>.*

Embedding a culture of quality assurance in higher music education institutions is both helped and hindered by the fact that quality, in the sense of excellence within a particular endeavour, has always been at the forefront of their mission. In the context of higher music education, quality most usually and instinctively means musical quality based on artistic standards, and this deeply-embedded concept can easily feel in conflict with connotations of quality that arise from more generic quality assurance procedures, which tend to focus mainly on issues of educational quality.

Nevertheless, there is now an increased understanding that the existence of an overall ‘quality culture’ in which artistic standards and educational quality go hand-in-hand will further reinforce the learning experience of students. As a result, in addition to the existing tools addressing artistic standards, internal quality assurance systems have been introduced in higher music education institutions in most European countries, which have

---

<sup>1</sup> For a full version of this document, see <http://msma.arts-accredit.org/site/docs/pdf/10-MSMAP-Quality-Assurance-Accountability-BriefingPaper.pdf>



been designed specifically for the needs and characteristics of the higher music education sector, and mainly address educational quality issues.

When looking at the higher education sector as a whole, it is clear that the multi-faceted concept of quality (explained above with the example of the higher music education sector) needs to be related to a third dimension: the international context. Many institutions have strong international profiles, with large groups of international students, and perceive themselves as international institutions; some institutions even call themselves 'world-class'. But what does it mean to be 'world-class'? And how does an institution know it is 'world-class'?

In the paragraphs below, three internationally based tools used in higher music education institutions are described that can help institutions to underpin their claims for being international or 'world-class', both in terms of artistic standards and educational quality. Even though these examples are music-specific, the authors believe that these tools can easily be used in other disciplines.

***1) How to address artistic standards through international cooperation:  
International External Examiners***

As described above, higher music education institutions have always had a strong focus on reaching the highest artistic standards. With the music profession being highly international and very competitive and higher music education institutions boasting strong international profiles, the question can be raised how the institutions know they are reaching internationally accepted artistic standards so that they can prepare their students for the international music profession the best way possible but also substantiate their international claims.

In the large ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia'<sup>2</sup>, a working group studied this question through the development of the principle of International External Examiners as a new form of cooperation, mobility and professional development between European institutions for higher music education. These International External Examiners can bring an external and international perspective to the assessment of (final) examination performances, which give institutions a sense of where they stand in relation to internationally accepted artistic standards. In this context, an International External Examiner would normally be a

---

<sup>2</sup> See for more information about the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia': [www.polifonia-tn.org](http://www.polifonia-tn.org).



specialist in a specific discipline (e.g. a teacher in violin, composition, voice or jazz guitar) with the task to serve on assessment panels in formative and/or summative performance assessments. The working group explored the use of International External Examiners in the assessment methods used by institutions and provided practical solutions to institutions interested in using such International External Examiners in a document entitled 'International External Examiners in Higher Music Education: Role, Purpose and Case Studies'<sup>3</sup>.

The working group identified the following reasons for the use of International External Examiners:

- To ensure that the programmes are continually updated in line with the requirements of international professional practice it is not only important that there are foreign students and teachers present in the institution, but also that the study programmes are continuously benchmarked at international level. International cross-institutional assessment can provide valuable information as to a programme's outcomes in relation to international artistic standards.
- International collaboration on assessment is an effective way of enhancing teachers' expertise through engaging with colleagues at international level and gaining understanding of other examination systems. Teachers gain experience of different pedagogic approaches but above all they learn to develop their own idea of what artistic standards are required internationally.
- Music is a very specialist discipline and there may be only a limited number of instrumental practitioners in a particular country. It is therefore possible that cross-institutional assessments with institutions within one country will have only limited benefit in terms of objectivity. The engagement of International External Examiners enlarges the number of practitioners and thus enhances objectivity.
- Lastly, this international approach can make a positive contribution to the accreditation and programme or institutional review procedures institutions will have to undergo as part of their national quality assurance systems. Not only can this approach show stronger links between the assessment, quality assurance and

---

<sup>3</sup> This document can be found at [http://www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/International%20external%20examiners%20in%20HME%20COMPLETE%20FINAL%20before%20design%2019.12.2014\(1\).pdf](http://www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/International%20external%20examiners%20in%20HME%20COMPLETE%20FINAL%20before%20design%2019.12.2014(1).pdf).



internationalisation policies of the institutions involved, but also provide a useful tool for comparing artistic standards of student achievement at the international level.

Based on the impressions from the experiments with International External Examiners in the framework of 'Polifonia' as well as from practice that has already been in place in institutions for some time, it was observed that from the perspective of the institution and the departments, the presence of the International External Examiners was perceived as highly valuable, as they gave an additional international and objective perspective to the assessment of the students' achievements. This support to the use of International External Examiners was also voiced by students, who commented that careful preparation of the International External Examiners was essential, especially in terms of providing information on assessment rules and criteria beforehand. They also pointed out that expectations of International External Examiners should be clearly set out.

In one example, detailed reports were made by International External Examiners following their visits. These reports were important sources of information that gave the conservatoire an outside view on the quality of its assessment practices. The reports were shared with the management team at the conservatoire in question and led to interesting and intensive internal discussions about the current approach to assessment and how it might develop as a result.

In another instance, quality assurance questionnaires were handed out to all external examiners, including the international ones. These showed some significant results: external examiners were asked if they thought the students were reaching internationally relevant artistic standards. The scores of International External Examiners tended to be somewhat lower than those of local external examiners. This discrepancy has the potential to inform the institution more effectively about its artistic standards in an international context.

The Working Group also gave some practical suggestions on how to organise the visits of International External Examiners. Under certain conditions such visits can be covered by ERASMUS+ staff mobility grants, which will help institutions meet the costs involved.

**2) How to address educational quality through international cooperation:  
International Benchmarking**



An interesting approach to address issues on educational quality from an international perspective can be found in the International Benchmarking Exercise (IBE), which the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester initiated in 2011 with partners from Oslo, Graz, The Hague, Montreal, Sydney, Singapore and Boston. The aim of the project was to obtain a set of comparative data from similar institutions against which they could compare themselves and which could be used for internal analysis (and not to obtain a common set of threshold data that institutions should meet).

All partners joined the project because they were interested in finding out their strengths and weaknesses with the aim to identify areas of improvement. An important challenge in the beginning of the exercise was the formulation of a list of questions for collecting the relevant data. This process was initiated at RNCM, where key departments and areas were asked what data they felt to be important and useful in establishing a common database. This included finance, research, curriculum, governance, employability, student services, facilities and resources. From this list, 13 main categories to be used in the benchmarking exercise were established. These were then sent to the partner institutions for agreement. Specific questions relating to each category were then drawn up by RNCM. The questions were sent to partners who were asked if they wanted to collect other type of data. In total the final questionnaire comprises 90 questions. Some simply require a yes/no answer but the majority actual data. Institutions also supplied their mission/vision statements. A contact person was designated in each institution, who is the link person responsible for ensuring the annual return of data. Questionnaires were then sent to each participating institution in their final form.

It was quickly found there were different interpretations by the institutions of the terms used in the questionnaire. The group therefore made its own glossary of terms with further explanations of the terms being used. This greatly facilitated the analysis and comparison of the data.

Data was first collected in an excel file: the template was prepared by RNCM with all questions agreed upon; each partner filled it in and sent its own file back to RNCM; finally, the RNCM coordinator compiled all the data in a single excel file, which was circulated. In December 2013, an online tool was developed by RNCM to simplify the collection and sharing of data between the partners, reduce the administrative overhead associated with keeping the data up-to-date, and facilitate easy access to the data for authorised users.



Since then, annual meetings of all partners have been dedicated to analysing and interpreting this data: benchmarking group members explain the data concerning their institution to the others, interpret it in the light of their national situations and contexts, discuss all together the difference of results between institutions for each question looked at, share their practices, etc. In addition, the areas addressed by the questionnaire have been reviewed. The collection of data on an annual basis will enable the observation of trends after a few years.

The first experiences show that the participation in such an international benchmarking exercise can provide institutions with very pertinent management information, in particular with a view on educational quality issues. For example, the data collected can counter or support concerns about the availability of practice rooms, an issue that is often raised as problematic in student satisfaction surveys. Other data that were found to be relevant were the number of teaching weeks, the number of one-to-one teaching classes per year, the balance between practical and theoretical courses, the availability of student services and application/admission numbers. By making an international comparison with institution with a similar size, structure and artistic ethos, the institutions are able to put the management information they collect through their own internal quality assurance activities on a regular basis into an international context.

The IBE project is described in more detail in a handbook on benchmarking entitled 'Learning from each other – Sharing good practice through benchmarking'<sup>4</sup>, together with other (non music-specific) case studies on international benchmarking, in order to provide institutions with information on why and how international benchmarking activities can be set up.

### ***3) MusiQuE: where artistic standards and educational quality come together in an international approach to external quality assurance***

So far, the above mentioned international activities have been designed to mainly support internal quality assurance processes. When addressing external quality assurance processes in higher music education, it is essential to ensure that the prominence of musical quality and the pursuit of the highest artistic standards mean that any system of external quality assurance which ignores, or seems alien to, the quality that is so deeply embedded in the discipline will seem not only irrelevant but potentially harmful. Higher

---

<sup>4</sup> This document can be found at <http://www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/V150531%20WG3%20EN%20Online.pdf>.





music education can therefore often feel itself to be ill-served by generic quality assurance procedures, especially those that concentrate upon bureaucratic systems, committee structures, etc. and neglect what is actually going on in pursuit of musical excellence in the teaching studios and performance spaces of its institutions.

It is with this reality in mind that a new organisation was recently established entitled MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement. As an independent foundation with the aim to support the enhancement of quality in the higher music education sector, MusiQuE is offering various external quality assurance services in the form of evaluation and review visits, and formal accreditation procedures<sup>5</sup>.

In MusiQuE the focus on artistic standards and educational quality come together: in its procedures attention is not only given to processes and educational quality issues, but also to artistic standards and musical content. Indeed, the MusiQuE standards have been mapped against part I of the ESG, which mainly addresses educational quality, and the procedures are implemented with the help of international peers from the field of music and, as a mandatory requirement, include the visit to classes, final examinations and concerts.

A good example of an approach promoted by MusiQuE that exemplifies this combination of addressing both artistic standards and educational quality is its practice in which the review panel attends final examinations of music students. As mentioned previously, most of these examinations take place in the form of a concert performance. During a MusiQuE review, the review panel attends both the full examination as well as the discussion of the assessment committee afterwards. This way, the review panel can assess two aspects: how the institution deals with artistic standards in terms of assessment and grading, but also how the formal aspects of the assessment (e.g. the presence of rules for examinations, the use of assessment criteria, the type of feedback given to the students) are being handled. As such an approach needs knowledge of both artistic standards and educational quality, it is clear why MusiQuE insists on the use of peers possessing knowledge and authority in both areas. The role of peers is therefore at the core of the system: their expertise is primarily as teachers within their discipline, but many of them also possess significant administrative experience and understand the issues of higher music education from this perspective as well.

---

<sup>5</sup> For more information about MusiQuE, please visit [www.musique-ge.eu](http://www.musique-ge.eu).



This way, MusiQuE procedures necessarily retain certain fundamental characteristics common to all quality assurance processes but these are tempered at every stage by the belief that only a quality that resonates with musical connotations of quality will commend credibility and respect among the higher music education sector, and especially among the teachers and students working in it. The authors also believe that this philosophy will increase the ownership of quality assurance processes by the teaching staff.

Since its foundation in 2014, MusiQuE has conducted an institutional review in Prague and been involved with the Agence pour l'Évaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignement Supérieur de la Communauté française de Belgique (AEQES) in the joint evaluation of four higher music education institutions in Belgium. In 2016, MusiQuE will be conducting accreditation procedures of a cluster of four Bachelor of Music programmes in the Netherlands as well as a quality enhancement review of the Young Talent Academy in The Hague. MusiQuE has also been approached by institutions in Germany and Iceland for accreditation or review procedures. Thus, there seems to be a clear interest of the sector in a review body promoting an overall 'quality culture' in which artistic standards and educational quality go hand-in-hand.

MusiQuE currently seeks further international recognition: in early July it was reviewed by an external panel comprising a student and experts from the higher education and quality assurance sectors. MusiQuE was assessed against the new ESG and intends to apply for listing on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

### **Conclusion**

The examples of international activities described above demonstrate the importance of shaping quality assurance systems based on the consideration that quality should address both academic standards and educational quality. Although these examples are specific to the field of music, the authors believe that they are transferable and valuable to other disciplines and that they illustrate diverse ways in which international activities can support quality assurance, so that the "European" aspect of the ESG could be reinforced.

### **References:**

Messas, L. & Kuzminykh, Z., 2012, 'International cooperation in discipline-specific quality assurance: NCPA-AEC joint accreditation of Russian higher education programmes', in Crozier, F. et al. (Eds.), *How does quality assurance make a difference?: A selection of*



*papers from the 7th European Quality Assurance Forum* (Brussels, European University Association).

Cox, J., Beccari, L., Prchal, M., Eiholzer, H., & Messas, L., 2010, 'Developing a 'Cantus Firmus' in European quality assurance by building bridges between national contexts and subject-specific European-level initiatives: observations and experiences from the field of music', paper presented at the fifth European Quality Assurance Forum, Lyon, France, 18-20 November 2010.

Messas, L., & Prchal, M., 2010, 'Why respecting diversity and creativity is essential in quality assurance and accreditation processes: Observations and experiences in the field of music', in Blättler, A., et al. (Eds.), *Creativity and Diversity - Challenges for Quality Assurance beyond 2010: A selection of papers from the fourth European Quality Assurance Forum* (Brussels, European University Association).

Prchal, M., 2008, 'Quality assurance and accreditation in the European Higher Education Area: Music as a case study', in Beso, A. et al. (Eds.), *Implementing and Using Quality Assurance – Strategy and Practice: A selection of papers from the second European Quality Assurance Forum* (Brussels, European University Association).