

CONTRIBUTION OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATOIRES (AEC) TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE NEXT GENERATION OF EU PROGRAMMES IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING



The European Association of Conservatoires (AEC)

The AEC is a European association bringing together almost 300 institutions for higher music education, which aims at representing the interest of the European higher music education sector and promoting mobility and cooperation at the European level among its members (www.aecinfo.org). This is being done through various initiatives and projects. Over the years, the AEC has implemented many projects supported by the ERASMUS, ERASMUS MUNDUS, CULTURE, TEMPUS, CONNECT, SOCRATES and eLEARNING programmes of the EU. In its flagship project 'Polifonia' supported under the academic networks strand in ERASMUS, the AEC has developed various innovative tools to support European cooperation and mobility, such as a Sectoral Qualifications Framework for Higher Music Education, a European-level subject-specific framework for quality assurance and accreditation in music and a pool of subject-specific 'Bologna' promoters.

A view on a new generation of EU programmes in education and training

It is noticeable from the recent documents addressing European cooperation in (higher) education, such as the 'Youth-on-the-Move' communication, there is a strong tendency to concentrate on quantitative targets for the mobility of individuals. Even if we fully agree with the importance of promoting mobility of youth, students and professionals in the European context, it is our opinion that the time has come to increase the commitment of all stakeholders dealing with European cooperation in higher education on further **shaping the context** in which this mobility is taking place. This requires a stronger focus on institutional cooperation and on the support to the development of tools that will promote and facilitate mobility.

Based on its long-term experiences with European cooperation projects, the AEC furthermore believes that this European context of cooperation and development should have a strong subject-specific basis, so that as many teachers and students as possible can be involved. Taking into account that in many disciplines a lack of information on (and therefore understanding for) the various European-level reform processes (such as the Bologna Declaration process) still exists among teaching staff and students, the AEC would like to stress the need for **a stronger role for academic disciplines in the new generation of EU programmes**.

This role can be achieved by supporting European-level subject-specific cooperation tools, such as:

1. The development of **joint European programmes** in higher education with built-in mobility components.
2. The development of European-level **Sectoral Qualifications Frameworks** that will facilitate the recognition of studies and qualifications and are clearly aligned with the EQF. The 'Tuning' Project has done important work in this area.
3. The development of **subject-specific European-level approaches to quality assurance and accreditation**, which can provide quality assurance activities of institutions and national quality assurance procedures with an additional European and subject-specific dimension.
4. The creation of subject-specific **'Bologna' promoters**: as the Bologna process is now entering a phase of further implementation, there is a need for advice from experts that are fully informed about both the Bologna process and the discipline in question, and not just experts on the Bologna process. This will help the process to bridge the gap to academics and students.
5. The creation of **information provision geared towards specific target groups**, such as the www.doremifasocrates.org website with tailor-made information on European cooperation for

music students and teachers, and the www.studymusicineurope.org website with tailor-made information on international mobility for music students worldwide.

6. The further implementation of **Intensive Programmes** in specific academic disciplines that are currently handled by the National Agencies. However, in our opinion the current requirement for a minimum duration of 10 days needs to be reduced to 7 days including travel.

The importance of centralised actions in general and the Networks in particular

The previous tools can only be achieved when the new generation of EU programmes for education and training will have, in addition to a strong focus on individual mobility, a robust support mechanism for centralised actions promoting institutional cooperation, joint curriculum development and the study of modernisation and reform issues.

In particular, it is clear there is an important role for the ERASMUS Networks to play, as they are set up in a subject-specific way. The Networks are the ideal tool to disseminate, develop and implement issues developed in the framework of the European policy towards higher education. The 'Bologna' Process mentioned above is a clear example, but there are other processes taking place, such as the 'Youth-on-the-Move' Initiative, and the EU Agenda for New Skills and Jobs. By involving the Networks, the European Commission could use these as a sort of 'Icebreakers' to disseminate information about these processes and test the implementation of (certain components of) these processes at disciplinary level.

Considering their potential in relation to European policy development in higher education, it is somewhat surprising the European Commission is not using the ERASMUS Networks in a more proactive way. It is exactly the networks that give the Commission a direct link to large numbers of institutions without having to take into account the positions and opinions of all those policy layers that usually exist between the Commission and the institutions, such as the EUA and the national rectors' conferences, each with their own political agenda. In a way, the use of the networks could be simple and effective: whenever a communication or report would be produced by the Commission, it would be sent to the networks with the request to send a reply or position by a certain deadline. This would undoubtedly have as an effect that not only the views of the Commission would be better known, but there would also be a stronger debate about these views in the higher education sector at various levels and, as a result, a possibly more efficient implementation and policy development.

Another clear strength of the networks is the ambition to draw upon the participation and expertise of institutions that are located in all European countries, including regions without a strong tradition in European cooperation. In fact, as it is required for academic networks to have partners in every single country eligible for the Lifelong Learning Programme, network coordinators are forced to find suitable partners in cities, regions and countries one may not have originally thought of. In the field of music, where most of the European collaboration has been concentrated around institutions in the capitals and important cultural centres, this is a crucial point, as there is a clear need for all institutions (whether located in the large cities or in what could be described as the 'periphery') to be fully informed about the main European developments in higher education. Although it is difficult for a project with such a large partnership to involve all partners at the same level of participation, the networks provide the framework and flexibility to involve all partners in many ways: the ERASMUS Network for Music 'Polifonia' has done this by making a 'participation schedule' in which all partners are active either as working group members, hosts of site visits, organizers of activities, seminars participants or providers of information to the project research efforts. In order to achieve this inclusive approach, 'Polifonia' has also pursued an active policy towards linguistic diversity through the ambition of translating as many publications as possible in English, French and German.

The inclusion of non-academic participants is another point that is a clear asset of the networks. 'Polifonia' has used this opportunity to involve representatives from the music profession, which has

already proved to be very valuable in terms of the validation and external evaluation of the work being done in the project and the ability to find relevant information from the professional world.

The potential of these Networks would even be increased if:

- The **'borders' between levels of education are taken down**. In COMENIUS and GRUNDTVIG networks exist as well. Based on the growing awareness that the various levels of education, as well as formal and non-formal education, should much more interact (the EQF targets all levels of education and suggests tools for the recognition of informal and non-formal learning), should there not be a closer link between these networks or even one network for all levels of education? This way, the networks could have a 'spider-in-the-web' function across different levels of education and programmes.
- **International cooperation with non-EU countries are increased**. In order to avoid 'euro-centrism' as noticed by some in relation to the Bologna Process developments and the need for information about such European developments in other parts of the world, a policy towards the dissemination at international level of information about these developments must be activated. Furthermore, international cooperation can improve the quality of higher education in Europe. The recent development of including non-EU partners into the ERASMUS Network should be therefore expanded, which begs the question of it is really necessary to continue with ERASMUS and ERASMUS MUNDUS as separated programmes.
- The **management procedures for the networks are simplified**. At this moment, working with the network funding is very time-consuming due the heavy regulations in relation to budget control (in particular related to staff costs) and management (e.g. the requirement to establish formalized partner contracts with every single partner). Based on the understanding that we are dealing with large networks involving a large number of institutions and participants, some exceptions should be made to the current procedures that may work well for smaller projects, but are very cumbersome for the large networks.
- **Selection will be made on quality and not on a preset selection of themes or subject areas**. In relation to the question whether there should be less networks with better funding or more networks with lower funding in the future, we strongly believe that there should be an inclusive approach towards the disciplines having the opportunity of creating a network. The selection should therefore not be based on assumptions made beforehand on the relevance or size of certain disciplines, but on the quality of the proposals, the partnership, the work already realized, and the willingness and capacity of the network to fulfil the 'Icebreaker' and 'Spider-in-the-web' functions mentioned above.

Some further observations

Following an extensive consultation of its membership in September 2010, the following issues should also be mentioned in relation to the new generation of programmes:

- The low levels of the student grants continue to be a major obstacle for students to participate in ERASMUS exchanges. This needs urgent attention in the construction of the new programme.
- The possibility for repeat ERASMUS grants at both Bachelor and Master level for the same student.
- A streamlining at European level and simplification of administrative procedures for the ERASMUS grants administered by the National Agencies.
- ERASMUS mobility statistics the AEC collects on an annual basis show a clear misbalance between East -> West mobility and West -> East mobility, with East -> West mobility vastly outnumbering West -> East mobility. Incentives should be created to remedy this misbalance.
- Through the above-mentioned subject-specific 'Bologna' promoters and by addressing this in networks and centralised actions, a renewed focus should be given to recognition and ECTS, which are still causing challenges in the mobility of students.

For more information, please contact the AEC at aecinfo@aecinfo.org.